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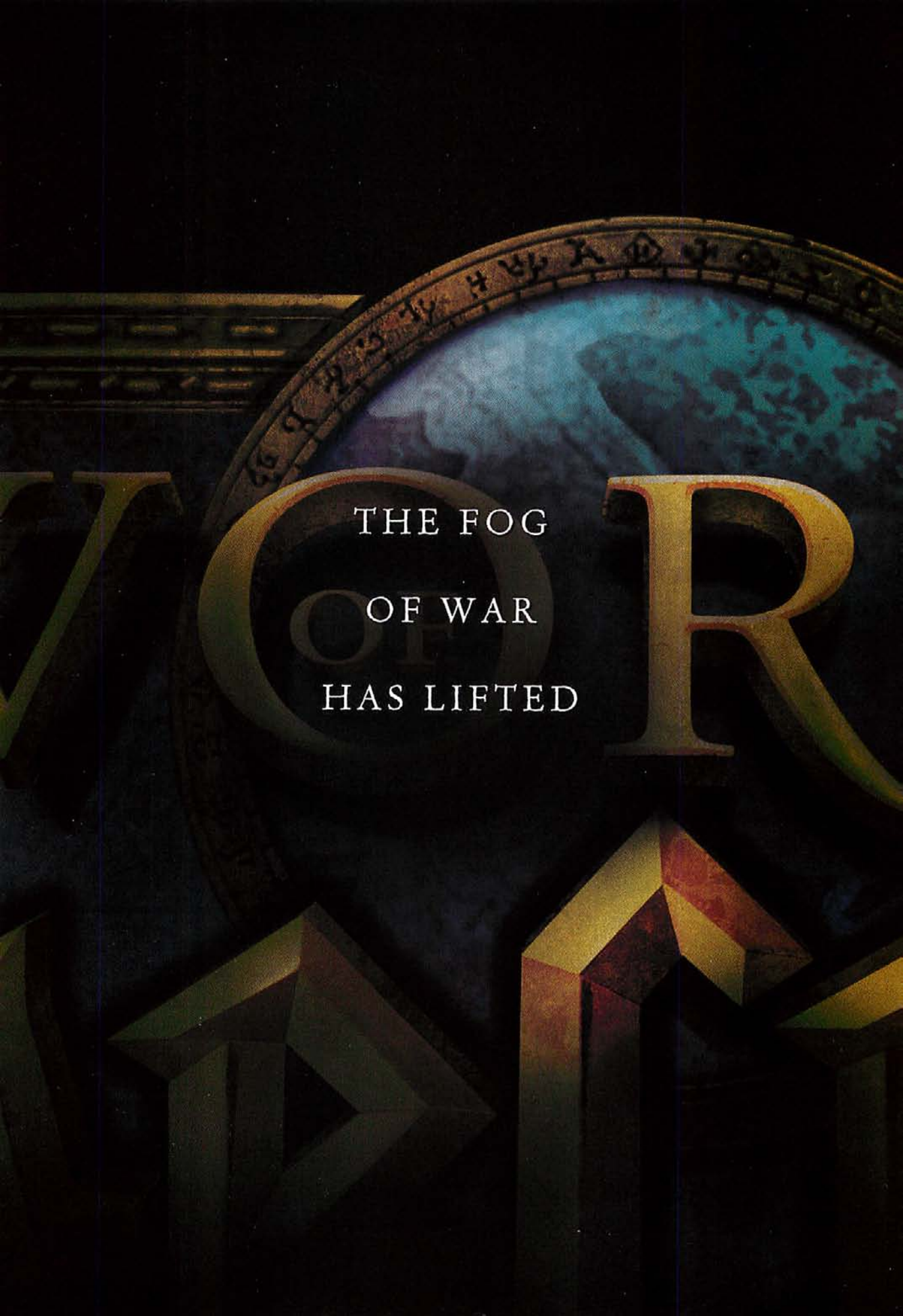
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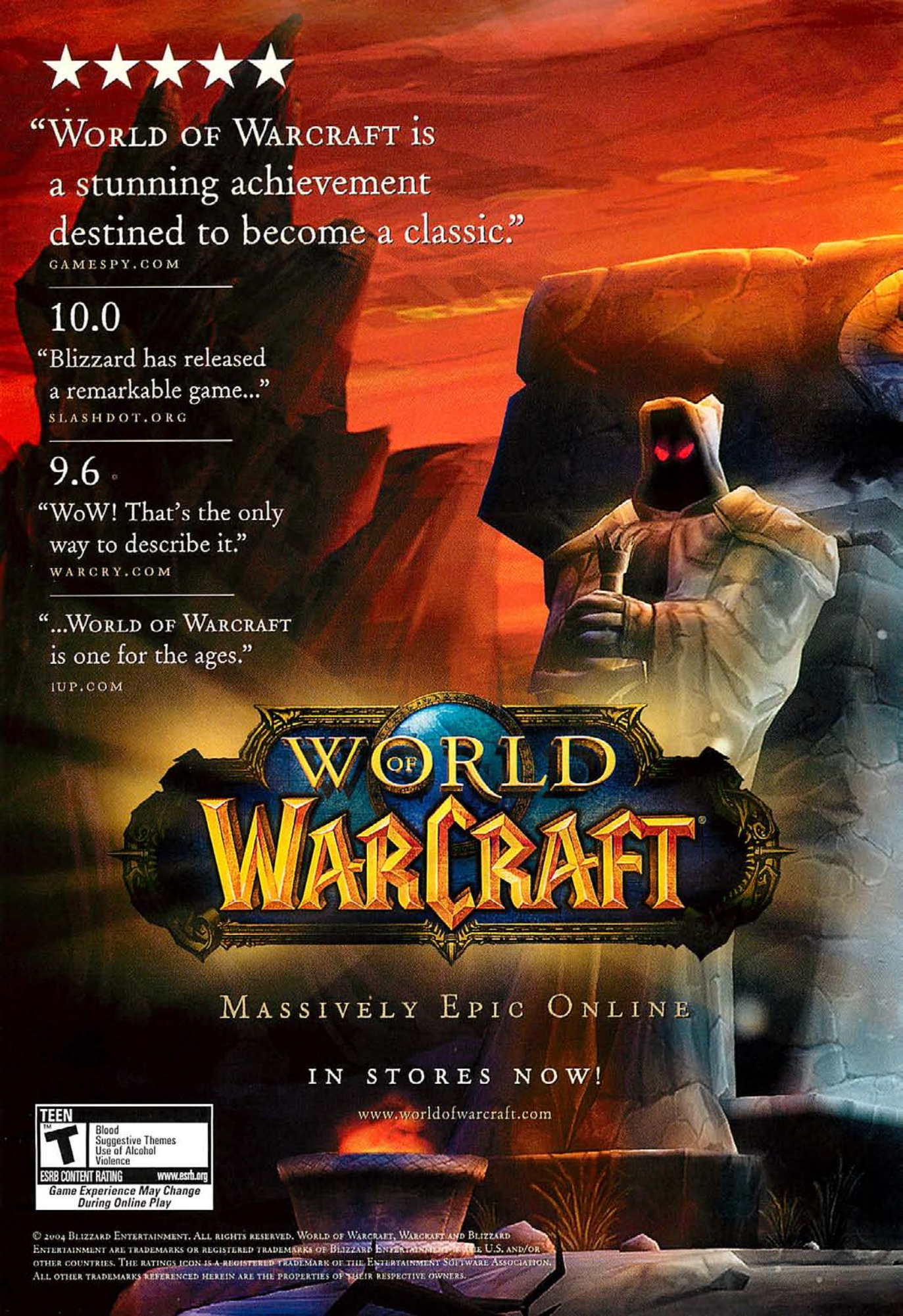
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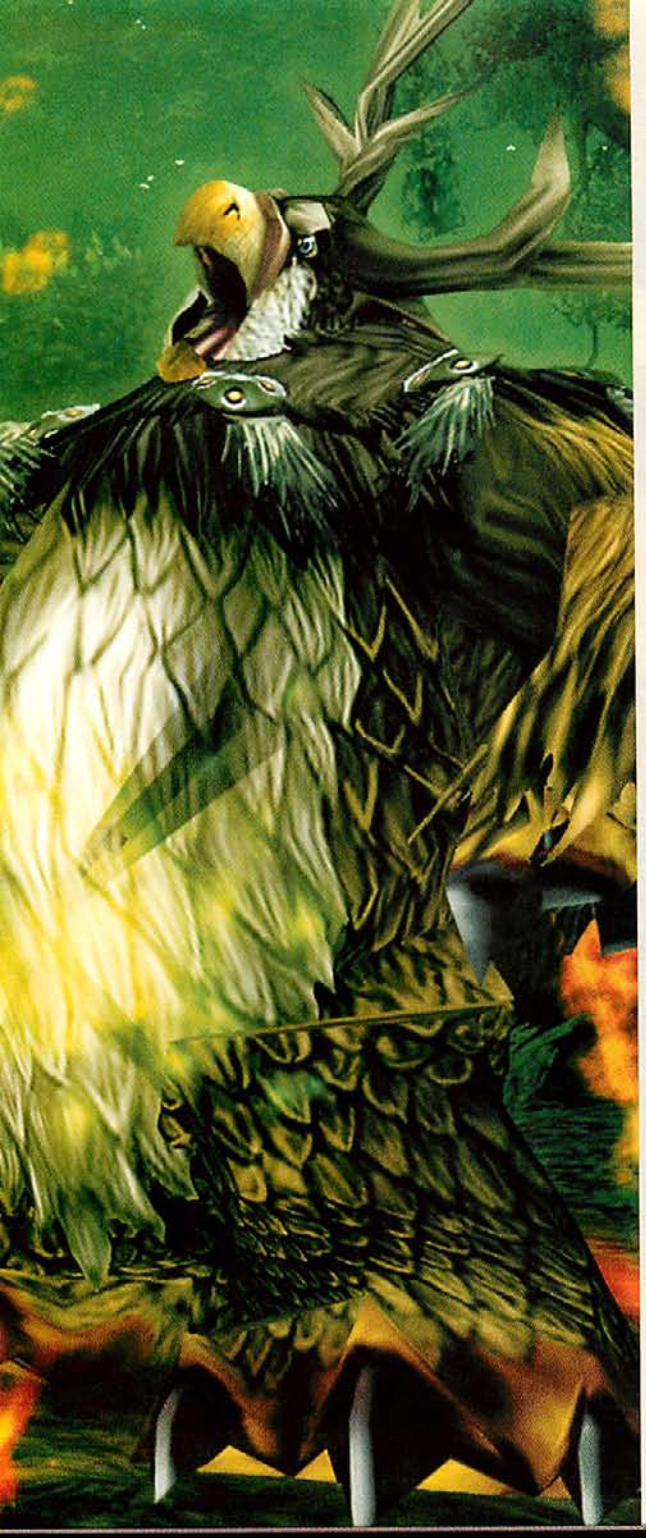
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LUCASARTS

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This month, feast your eyes on Tim Schafer's psychedelic adventure **Psychonauts**, as well as Atari's upcoming time-bending FPS, **TimeShift**. We've also got details on **Act of War: Direct Action**, hands-on multiplayer impressions of **Battlefield 2**, and the sweetest **Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil** Loading shot ever!

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COVER STORY
2004 was a monumental year for PC gaming, and it's once again time for us to give credit where credit is due in our annual Game of the Year awards. Which games walked away with top honors this time around? Not **Leisure Suit Larry** or **Catwoman**, that's for sure.





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Finally, the game you've all been waiting on the edge of your seats for: **Alexander**. And if that doesn't get you excited, we've also got **The Chronicles of Riddick** and **Prince of Persia: Warrior Within**.

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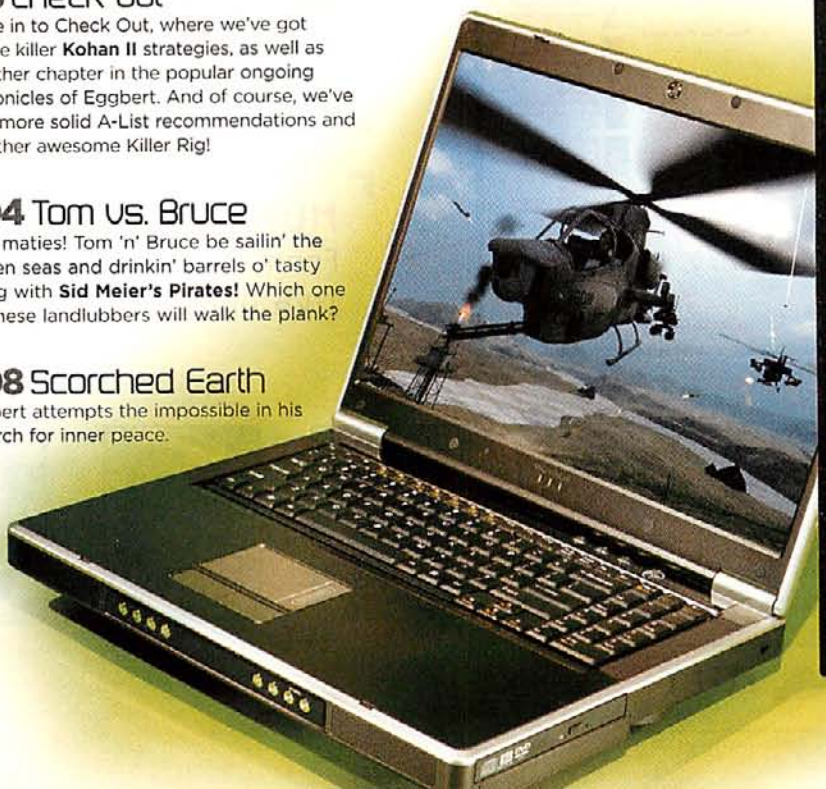
Tune in to Check Out, where we've got some killer **Kohan II** strategies, as well as another chapter in the popular ongoing Chronicles of Eggbert. And of course, we've got more solid A-List recommendations and another awesome Killer Rig!

104 Tom vs. Bruce

Arr, maties! Tom 'n' Bruce be sailin' the seven seas and drinkin' barrels o' tasty grog with **Sid Meier's Pirates!** Which one o' these landlubbers will walk the plank?

108 Scorched Earth

Robert attempts the impossible in his search for inner peace.



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It seems that **Playboy: The Mansion** got a big head start on the ratings at 1UP, even weeks before its actual release. We'll see how it measures up, especially against such big titles as **Half-Life 2**, **World of WarCraft**, and **Doom 3**.

CGW_GIZMO.1UP.COM



We apologize for the inconvenience, dear readers, but for the next three months, the only picture you are going to see here is this. Like everyone else at this so-called magazine, Darren needs a good prodding in order to get his work done... or to update his blog more than twice a decade. So if you tire of this picture, visit this slacker's webpage and tell him to get to work!

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No one can be self-deprecating and self-defacing all the time. In light of that fact, Jeff kindly created the perfect club, *CGW* Sucks!, for all of you out there dedicated to helping us in those trying times when our self-esteem is dangerously high. So please, drop on by, even if it's only with a one-liner, and save us from ourselves. If your funny meter is running low, you can always go with a classic and pick on Jeff for his thumbs-up pictures.

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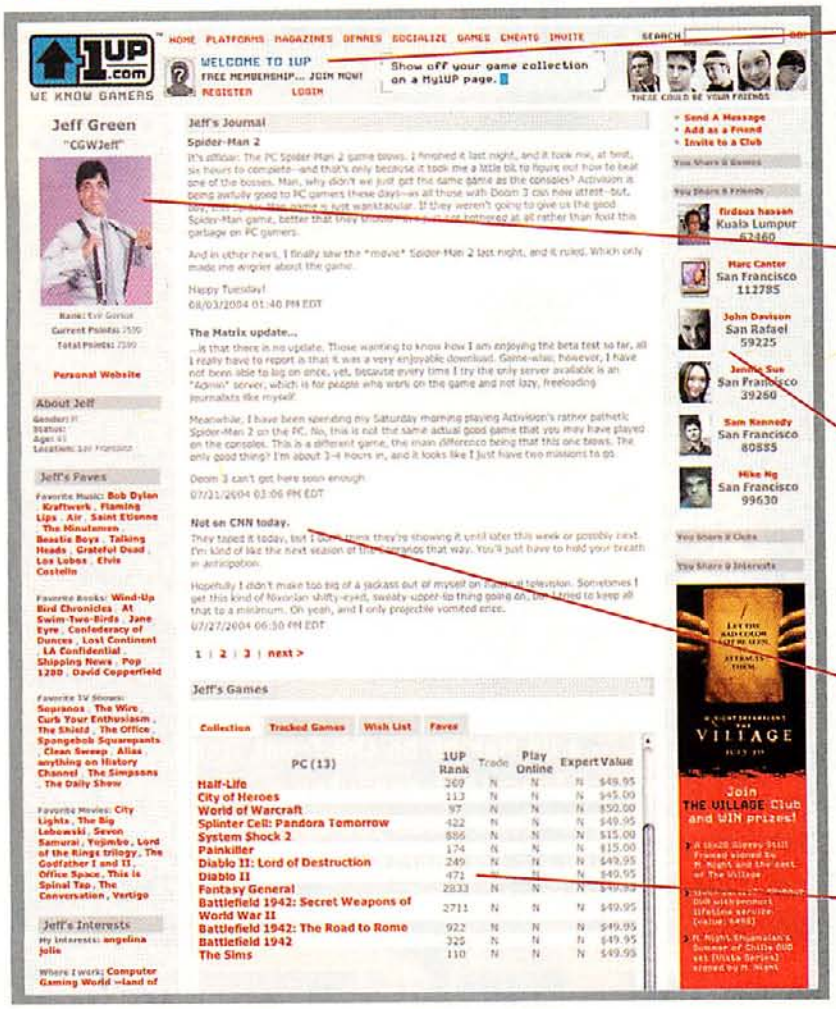
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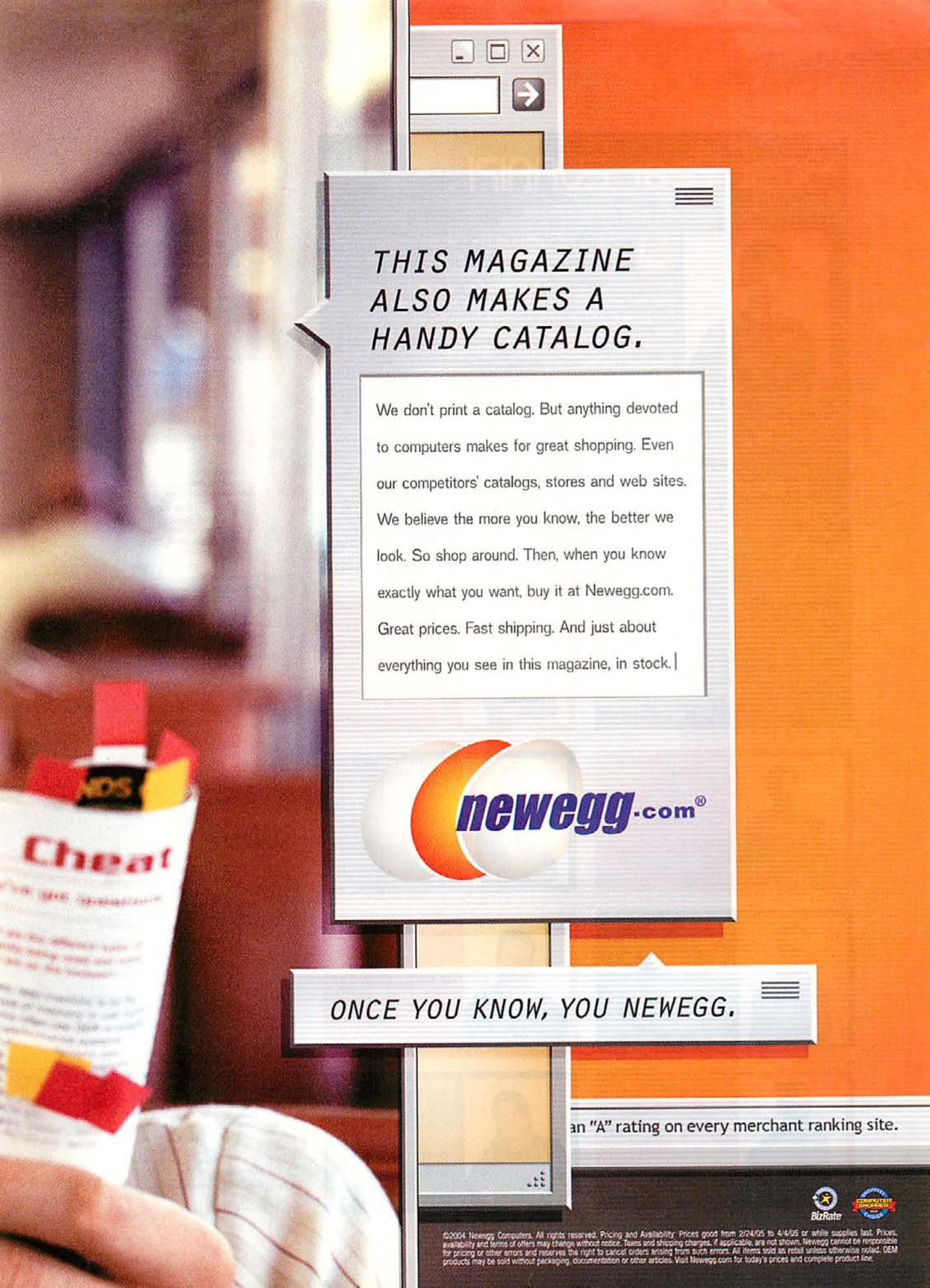
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Best Year EVAR!?!

Or, The Impossible Task of Picking a GOTY



Usually, our Games of the Year feature is a lot of fun to write. Typically, the winners in all the major categories are somewhat obvious to us early on, so it's really just a matter of making it official. But this year, something very frustrating (and cool) happened: There were a ton of great PC games. And that made our jobs much harder this month. I know, I know—poor us. We had too many great games to play. Cue the violins.

In any event, our choices were not easy, and I'm sure that when you see our awards you will probably agree with some and wonder what we were smoking regarding others (to which I answer, just the regular stash). But hey, it's those differences of opinion that all add to life's rich pageant, don't you think? If we all agreed about everything, well, why would you need this magazine? You could just write it yourself. And then we'd be the ones sending you cranky e-mails! Yay!

Actually, to be honest, as I write this, we have not even taken the final vote on a few of the categories, including the Game of the Year. That's because we are still arguing. The only thing we did agree upon, in fact, is that *Katamari Damacy* cannot be the winner since it's a PlayStation 2 game.

What really matters, of course, is what I think. Because it's all about me. So what were my favorite PC games of 2004? Glad you asked.

1) World of WarCraft
2) Sid Meier's Pirates!
3) Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War
4) The Sims 2
5) Doom 3

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1. Painkiller
2. City of Heroes
3. Unreal Tournament 2004
4. World of WarCraft
5. Grim Fandango (yeah, I know, I was a little behind on this one)



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1. City of Heroes
2. The Sims 2
3. Painkiller
4. Zuma Deluxe
5. World of WarCraft



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3. The Political Machine
4. Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow
5. Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patriots



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1) Bejeweled 2
2) World of WarCraft
3) Sid Meier's Pirates!
4) Prince of Persia: WW
5) Doom 3



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2) Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault
3) Sid Meier's Pirates!
4) World of WarCraft
5) Doom 3



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Letters

All you do to me is talk talk

DUH NUH NUH NUH NUH NUH NUH!

My friend and I were arguing, but we agreed that Jeff Green is George Clooney sexy, Michael Jennings is Michael Keaton sexy, Darren Gladstone is Val Kilmer sexy, and Robert Coffey is Adam West sexy. Ryan Scott isn't sexy; he just reminds me of a geekier Ken Jennings.

Chris "The One" Davidson



FWIW, Robert believes he's more of a Christian Bale. But from a different movie.

YOU LIKE US! YOU REALLY LIKE US!

I've been reading *CGW* for the last six months now, and I have to say that the overall quality and hard work put into the magazine is impressive. You guys always have the information that I am looking for and always have good coverage on new games and gaming forums (which is where the Canadian PC game mags just don't cut it for me). The issue that solidified my overall impression was the January 2005 issue, which gives valuable information on 102 free games, some of which are PC classics. I have to hand it to you guys at *CGW*—you do your research pretty well because I have been looking for some of those games for a little while now, and you guys made my job a little bit easier. Thanks a lot and, well, as I would say to fellow gamers for the holidays: Good food, good beer, good God, let's play, eh!

Josh Bauder

REALITY BITES

Robert Coffey isn't the only one who's forgotten where the line is between games and reality (Scorched Earth, Holiday 2004). During a long *Thief 2* session, I had been making good use of Garrett's mechanical, telescoping eye. Then I went to the mall. Spying something in the distance, I twitched the right side of my face, searching for the muscle that would make my eye zoom in. Then I remembered that my two dumb organic eyes don't have that function. Darn. But it's nice to know I'm not the only one to have a moment like this, even if my only company is Mr. Coffey.

LarryFromMadrid

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

Recently, I got into *World of WarCraft*, picking a PVP server as home to my level 21 undead mage Bernie. The only problem is that a level 21 mage gets slashed down in three hits when he's in contested territory where level 40 human warriors ride by on their horses and attack him. But I found a way to get back at them. I call it the Art of Sheeping. You see, one day I was running away from a level 35 warrior (as I normally do), and in my last moment of desperation I cast polymorph, promptly turning the dwarf into a sheep for 30 seconds. I was amazed that a relatively low-level player like me could get away with that. That's when the mass sheepings began. I even got an entire group killed because of one measly sheeping. As they were running by, I managed to sheep the straggler in the group, and they promptly all turned around to annihilate me. I ran into Tarren Mill to escape when one of them shot me with an arrow—which got the attention of the level 50 death-guards and several high-level players inside the city—the entire group of six people was slain because of one level 21 mage who can't keep his finger off the polymorph spell. I also managed to sheep a certain level 38 dwarf paladin no less than four times. Bernie is no doubt a household name in alliance territory. Imagine six dwarves gathering around the table planning their attack on horde players, when all of a sudden one of them types, "What about Bernie?" Silence falls over the group as they make plans about how to dispose of the low-level mage who won't think twice about sheeping the hell out of them. **Bernard Mantooth**



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We've gotten a number of responses to that column and all we can say is, for the love of God, go outside and find out what it's like to kiss a girl. That goes for you too, Robert.

FUN—NOW EVEN MORE ENJOYABLE

I just got around to reading Scorched Earth from the December issue and can say that you are 100 percent correct. The whole point of gaming is to have fun. I like a little unrealistic escapism after a hard day at work. And guess what...if I don't care for a particular game, I don't bitch about it, I just don't buy it. Simple as that. Tell those folks around your office to try to not analyze things too much...just try and enjoy them.

Matt

INTEGRITY IS JOB ONE

As a longtime reader of *CGW* (since about 1992), I wanted to write in and second your concerns about "exclusive first reviews"—probably the worst trend I've seen since I started gaming. I have now cancelled my subscription to your main competitor because I got fed up with month after month of whitewashes in which the review

Mail Bites

Rebecca is totally hot! I would take her on in the Thunderdome any day!

—Matt

What about a Gordon Freeman lookalike contest? You know they're out there.

—Thomas Borowski

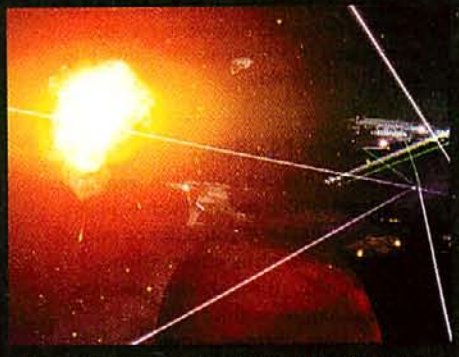
I know it won't stop Valve, but at least I can have my say: I HATE STEAM.

—Radek Skalski





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TEEN T Alcohol Reference, Fantasy Violence, Mild Language, Sexual Themes — ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

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conditions were clearly favorable to the game developer. However, I was disappointed by your decision to go along with the terms for *Doom 3*—playing a game under ideal conditions on a machine preselected by the developer hardly simulates the conditions a gamer would face. I didn't feel I could trust your review because I don't have the kind of screamer that you undoubtedly played the game on.
I still like your magazine (particularly Tom vs. Bruce and Rob Coffey's column) but urge you to stick to your principles and not get further into this early review business. It's only a matter of time before another *Black & White* comes along and embarrasses everyone who rushes out a review without taking the time to see how it plays over the long haul.

Aaron McPherson



FANTASY FULFILLED

Oh my God! I could not believe the whining over the new *Playboy* game. Porn may not make for the highest form of gaming out there, but *Playboy Magazine* is one of the great things about America. Games take players to a realm of fantasy, whether that be spilling the blood of Nazis, slaying dragons, or chillin' at the Playboy Mansion. If you do not realize this as a gamer, then you have missed the point. Also, the days of a limited game selection are over. Why whine about a new *Playboy* game when there are so many games out there to play? One of my longtime dreams has been to hang out at Hef's and enjoy the scenery. With the new game, my dreams become a bit more real. I'm thankful for the new game. I'm thankful for any new game that is based on something I consider cool. Instead of griping about games based on the porn industry, why don't these gamers come up with some new groundbreaking ideas to help move computer games to even bigger horizons?

J

We're right there with you, J. When else are the great unwashed gamer hordes going to get to hang at the grotto? Our motto: If it's good enough for Mini-Me, it's good enough for us.

NICE TRY!

I have tried numerous times to write a letter that would meet your standards and be published in your magazine. Seeing as none of my letters have yet been published, I've decided to do what all the other successful idiots do—

Let's stop right there. Where do you get off referring to our readers as "successful idiots"? Please. In all likelihood, they are just like us—unsuccessful idiots. Get the basics right and then, maybe, we'll publish your letter.

WTF?

What, or who, is flying in the background of the *Matrix Online* ad?



Cole

Those are some incredibly astute peepers you've got there, Cole. We asked Monolith if it could shed some more light on that almost-invisible figure, and it sent us this shot of a previously unrevealed new character class.

Make that 104

I just read your article in the January 2005 issue of *CGW* about the best 102 free games available on the Web...and I was sorely disappointed. You left off two of the greatest games in existence—*Soldat*, a 2D shooter that's free to try out, and *Forgotten Hope*, a massive mod for *Battlefield 1942*. Missing *Soldat* is all right, I guess, but I just don't see how you guys can overlook *Forgotten Hope*. I pity you if you have not yet experienced *FH* in all its 1.7-and-some-odd-gigabyte glory.

Austin

Consider our readers duly alerted, Austin. Thanks for the tip—if anyone else has some good free game suggestions, please send them our way.

Ye Olde Mailbag

Here at *CGW*, we believe in free speech—which pretty much explains our paychecks. If you'd like to join in, send us your pithy observations, urbane witticisms, sly compliments, and unhinged ranting to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com. Operators are standing by.

Mail Bites

Robert Coffey (and everyone else who works at *CGW*), thank you for being heroes to all of us kids out here in need of heroes. You truly are champions of light in dark times.

—Darth Burger and Fries

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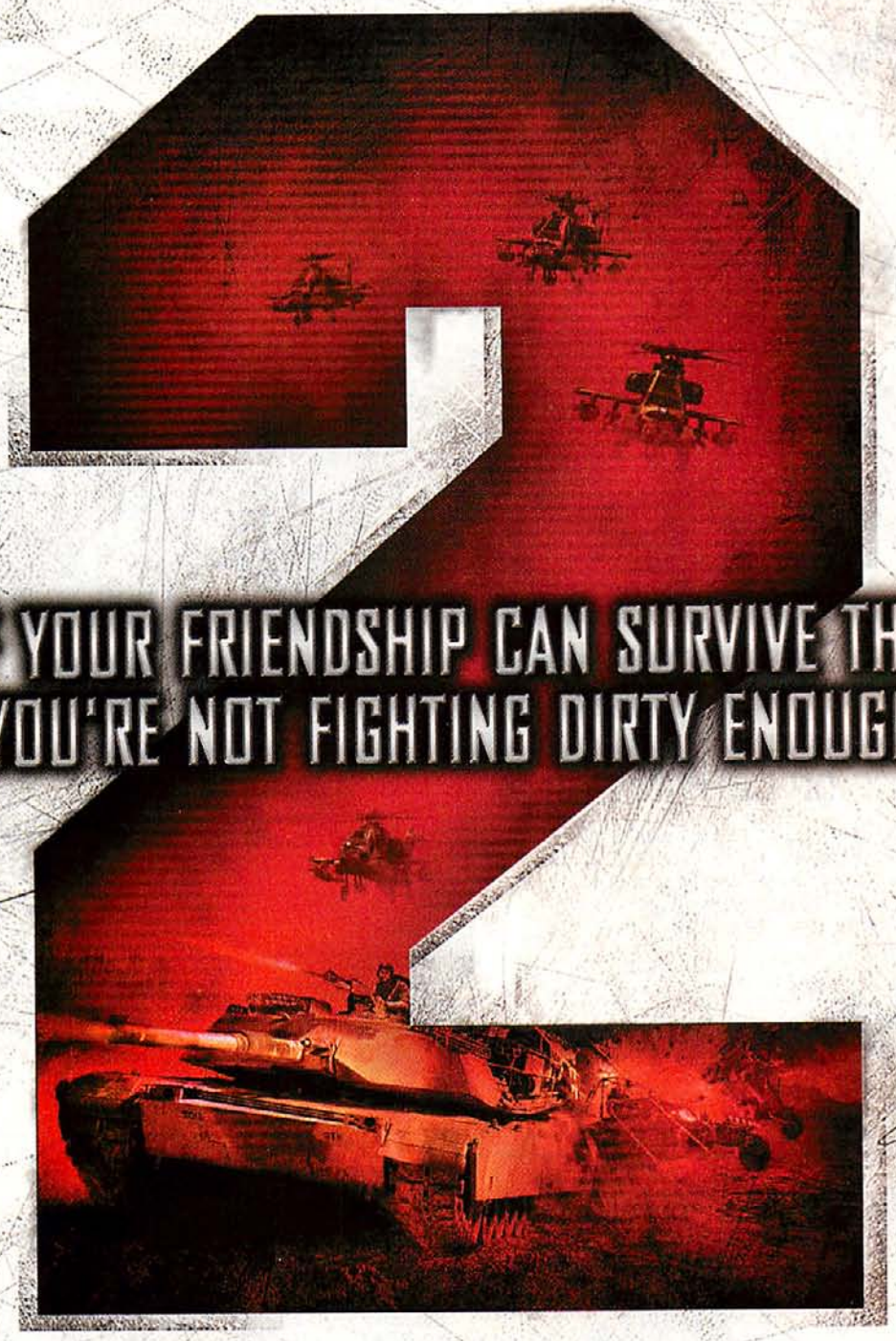
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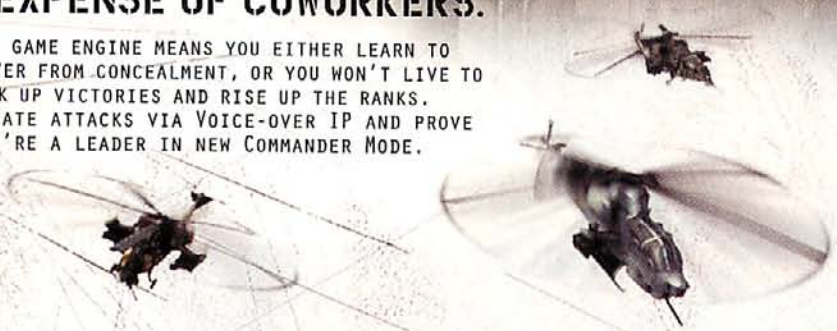
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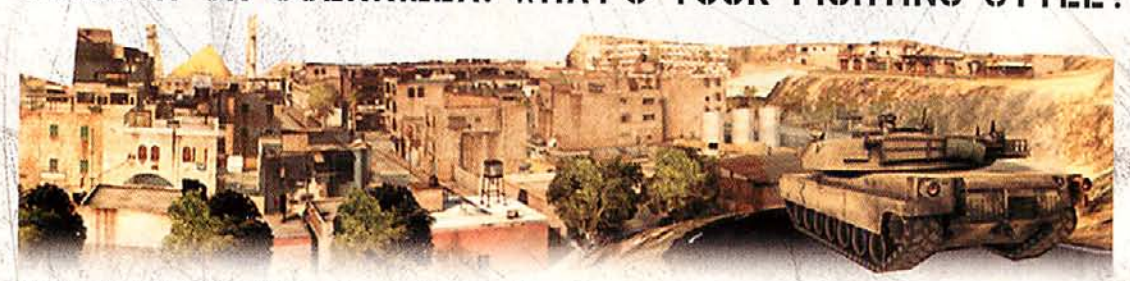
A NEW GAME ENGINE MEANS YOU EITHER LEARN TO TELL COVER FROM CONCEALMENT, OR YOU WON'T LIVE TO RACK UP VICTORIES AND RISE UP THE RANKS. COORDINATE ATTACKS VIA VOICE-OVER IP AND PROVE YOU'RE A LEADER IN NEW COMMANDER MODE.



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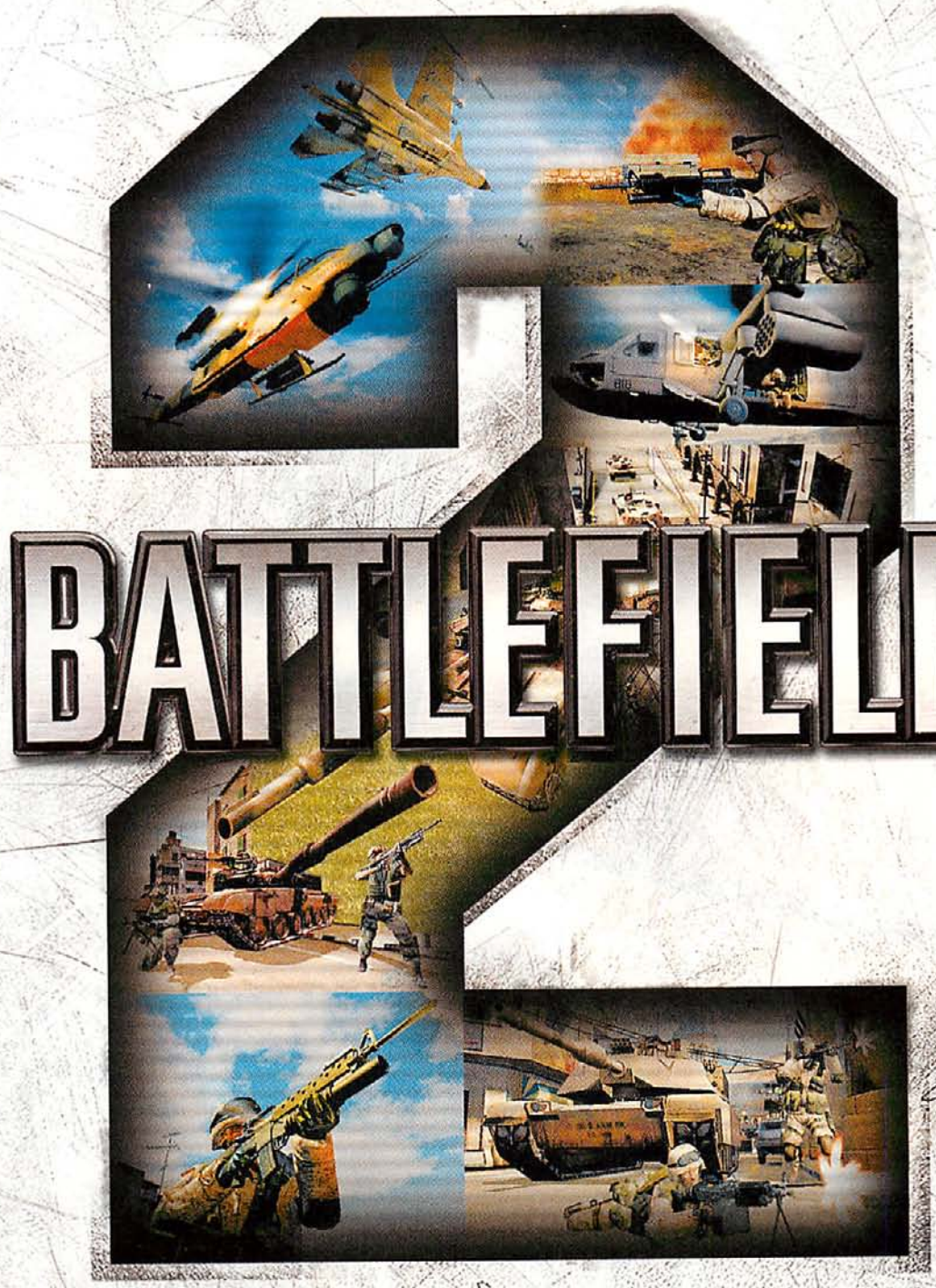
GEAR UP AS THE U.S., CHINA OR THE MIDDLE-EAST COALITION. THEN DECLARE 16, 32 OR 64-FIGHTER FREE-FOR-ALLS OVER MAPS OF CHINA OR THE MIDDLE EAST THAT SCALE TO THE SIZE OF THE MELEE.

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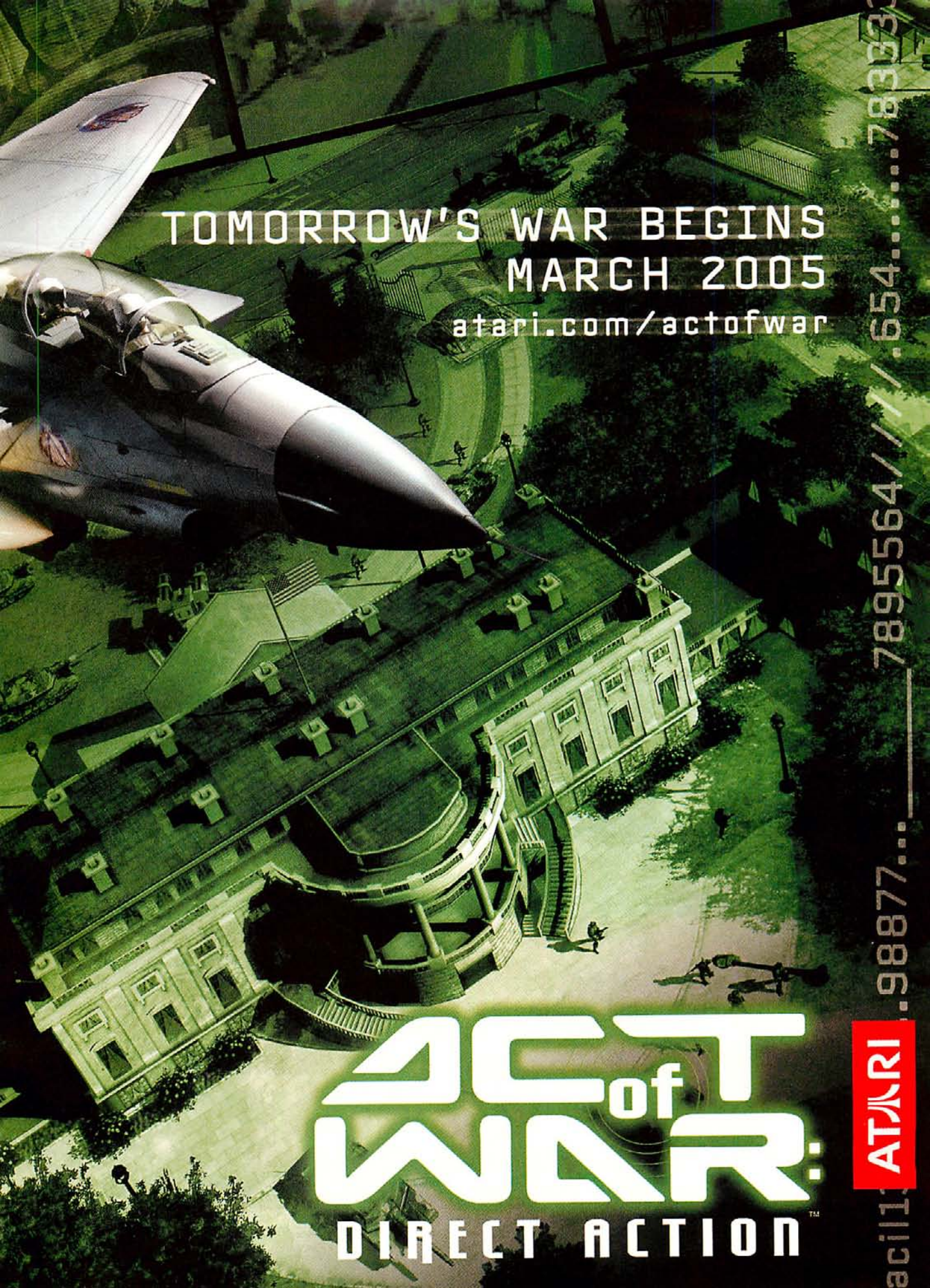
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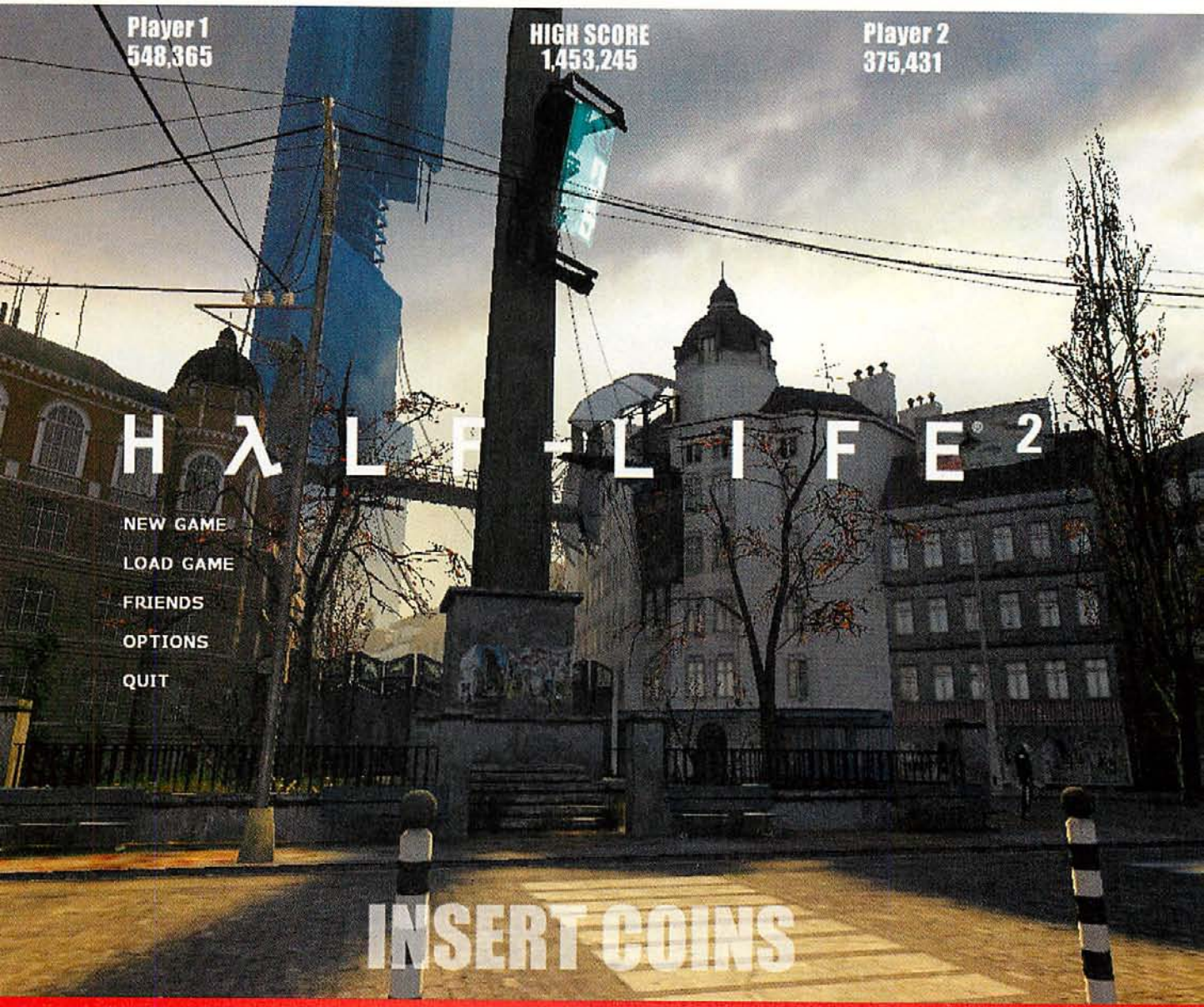
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INSERT COINS

The Half-life of a Quarter

Can an arcade version of *Half-Life 2* actually work?



Real 3D
Gimmick or good game idea? A set of goggles takes 3D into new dimensions.



Winner!
We got ourselves a winner of a brand-new cape! Jealous? Sorry you didn't enter?



Seropian speaks
The man behind *Stubbs the Zombie* and Wideload Studios talks all about his life after Bungie—and about his pants.

Soul Calibur. Street Fighter. Half-Life 2? Later this year, don't be surprised to see a cabinet holding Valve's newest first-person shooter sitting shoulder to shoulder with classic arcade staples. Valve has announced a partnership with Japanese arcade developer Taito to create an arcade version of Gordon Freeman's adventures in City 17, scheduled for a summer release in Japan. Taito, usually involved with only Japanese developers, met Valve through a mutual associate. "A friend at Softimage introduced us earlier this year [in 2004]," says Doug Lombardi, director of marketing at Valve. "They'd heard about *Half-Life 2* and had some ideas for an arcade version they wanted to discuss with us."



How much would you be willing to pay to get your *Half-Life 2* fix?



Nope, we doubt that there will be keyboard/mouse setups in arcades to play FPS games.



With our luck, the arcade machines will need to log on to Steam as well in order to play. Sigh.

PUTTING THE PC IN ARCADES

According to Taito, however, discussions between the companies are nothing new. "We have been communicating with Valve for technology exchanges before," says Takashi Naito, general manager of Taito's AM development department. "Taito was interested in increasing the lineup of gun games and the right timing had come."

The idea to convert *Half-Life 2* to an arcade format followed the announcement of Taito's Type X arcade hardware, constructed entirely of ordinary PC components. Valve is the first American company to announce support for the Type X, but the idea of tackling arcade development with PC parts is old news; Microsoft's Chihiro, UltraCade's Graphite, TLC's FlexArcade, and others have already been there, done that.

This isn't the first time Valve has been involved in arcades, either. Namco has been distributing an arcade version of *Counter-Strike*, dubbed *Counter-Strike Neo*, in Japan since the end of 2003 on its N2 platform, hardware very much like Type X. "[We] expected, when rumors started of *Half-Life 2* arcade, to see a Namco announcement," says Kevin Williams, editor of *The Stinger Report*, an international online trade publication covering arcade amusement. "The Taito announcement caught all of us by surprise and has instigated an inquiry into why Namco and Valve have fallen out."

Valve declined to comment on the subject, and Namco was unavailable as of press time, but due to Taito's limited reach in outside markets, if and when *Half-Life 2*'s arcade release spreads, "do not be surprised if in America, Taito actually uses Namco America to distribute the final system," says Williams.

IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME?

For the moment, Taito's plans for *Half-Life 2* in arcades don't include distribution outside Japan, though it expects that to change. A Japanese focus is an interesting choice, considering the market's general aversion to the genre. Taito doesn't see the market as bleakly. "We do not think first-person shooters are unpopular in Japan," says Naito. "There might not be enough interfaces which players can enjoy yet." How that interface is different in *Half-Life 2* is unknown, but Valve admits the transition from PC to arcade makes a difference—"PC users will be playing a very different version [of *Half-Life 2*]," says Lombardi. Taito has not detailed in-game changes or specifics about the cabinet's control style. Williams predicts an altered version of Taito's *Zoids Infinity* cabinet, a mech game operated with a dual-stick scheme, may be used with Taito's announced modifications, such as a widescreen monitor and 5.1 Dolby Digital Surround Sound. Just don't expect a keyboard and mouse.

"Traditionally, FPS games have had somewhat of a low profile in Japan—unlike the rest of the Asian market, where they are very popular." —Doug Lombardi, director of marketing at Valve

Even though the first-person shooter's acceptance is higher in the United States, American arcades have been in steep decline for years, which supports Taito's logic of a Japanese debut. "The U.S. market is only now struggling out of a deep hole and from a position of weakness, [and therefore the game] would not be best suited by an initial U.S. release," says Williams.

If the arcade version of *Half-Life 2* appears in the United States as Taito hopes, though, Valve's baby won't face a market dominated by Japanese games alone. Electronic Arts, LucasArts, and Microsoft, companies with little arcade experience, are dipping into the recuperating market. "We hope this machine will become the opportunity for [the] revitalization of [the] arcade industry," says Naito.

If there ever was a game to hook Japanese gamers on the first-person shooter, *Half-Life 2* is it. This summer, Valve, Taito, and the industry will find out if their lure is strong enough. **Patrick Klepek**



FIELD TEST

The Eyes (Kinda) Have It

New glasses take 3D to new dimensions

The whole idea of playing games in 3D is nothing new. That's why we keep getting suckered into buying new graphics cards every year. But actually seeing games in 3D? That kind of crazy talk earns you cock-eyed looks in this office. After all, past experiences haven't been that hot. ELSA had wired glasses that kept you tethered to your old Nvidia-card-based PC with mixed results a couple years back. And Sharp's 3D LCD technology is both interesting and vomit inducing at the same time. EDimensional, in the meantime, has been quietly working away on its fourth generation of wireless 3D-glasses technology for monitors (E-D glasses, $99; www.edimensional.com). Games that already have some degree of 3D suddenly have a lot more depth.

EYEBALLING THE TECHNOLOGY

The good news is that the 3D technology is now card agnostic. First, plug the middleware box into your ATI or Nvidia graphics card, then attach the other end to your monitor. Align the IR receiver on top of your monitor, and you're good to go. The drivers that reside in the background kick on in-game, and the real shock here is that the unit actually worked in some of our tests.

The cluttered, cramped corridors of *Doom 3* seemed a little more ominous—and less sharp. But for the extra 3D effect, we can sacrifice some screen quality. A game that really benefited was *LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth*. The "living world" map that is one of the centerpieces of the game looked simply amazing. Mount Doom and the various towers popped out of the screen while the HUD floated above. We were anxious to see similar results with *Half-Life 2*, but nothing happened. Huh? Nathan Newman of EDimensional explained that drivers may need some tweaking when working with new games with proprietary engines. "But we have really quick response times from customer feedback," he adds. A lack of source-engine support is pretty notable, but to emphasize how quickly the drivers get updated, a working version arrived days later. If you have a CRT or LCD monitor with high refresh rates, this system could be worth checking out if you're jonesing to eke a little more out of your gaming experience. Just don't expect to look cool while you're doing it. **Darren Gladstone**

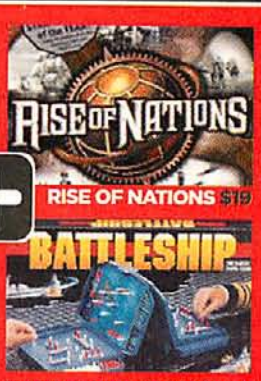
DUMPSTER DIVER

Digging up gold in the bargain bins

The *Axis & Allies* brand has a lot of cachet with the armchair general crowd. Heck, we spent entire weekends plotting the demise of Eastern Europe back in the day. Which leads us to ask, "Why is the PC game so off?" There's no need to blow 50 bucks on this dud when you can get a better World War II fix elsewhere with *Codename: Panzers Phase One*. Tired of reliving history? Then make your own in *Rise of Nations*. Or grab a buddy, some beers, and a board game and yell out, "You sank my battleship!"



CODENAME: PANZERS PHASE ONE $19



RISE OF NATIONS $19

BATTLESHIP BOARD GAME $12



AXIS & ALLIES $50

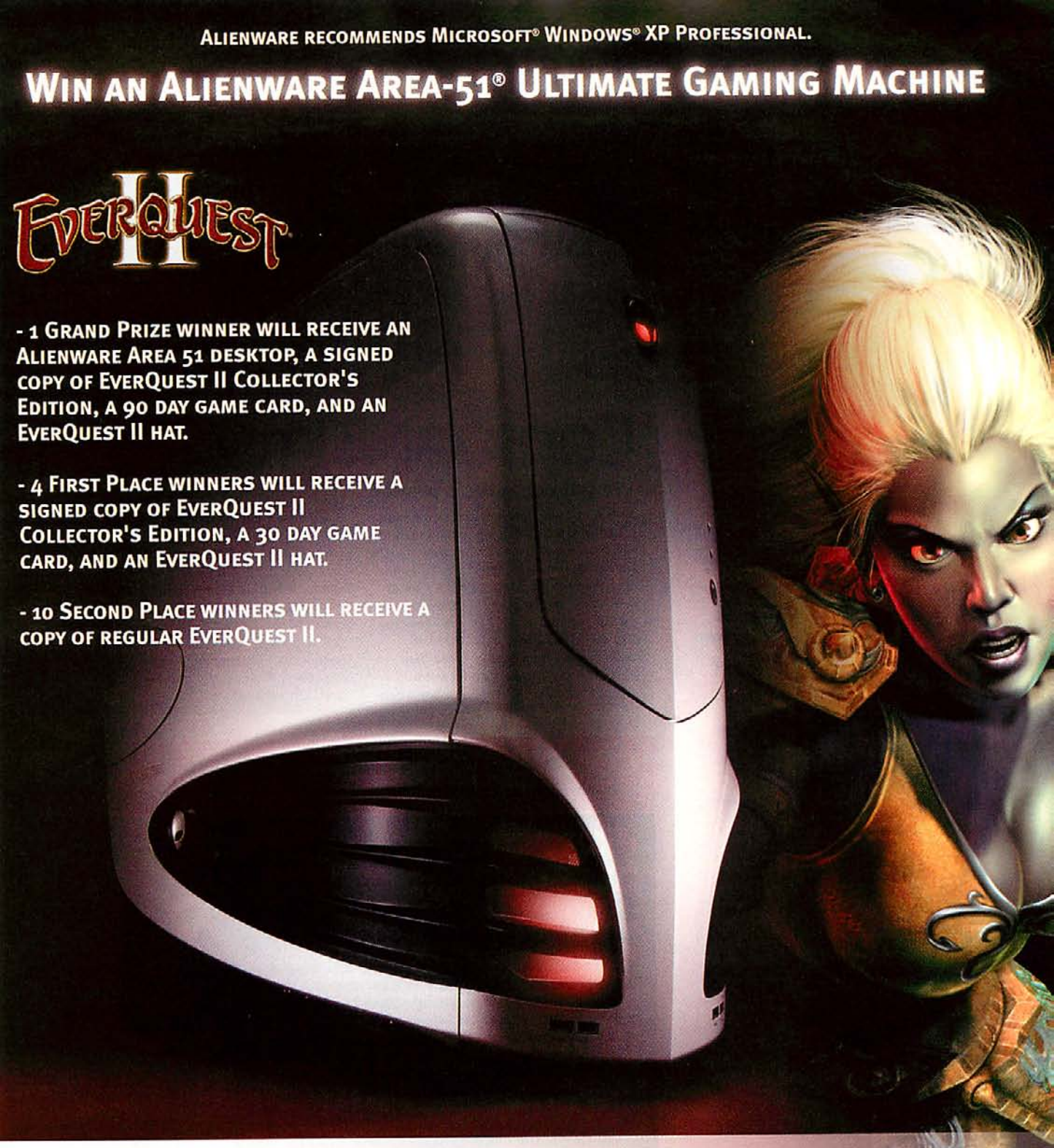
1UP.com NEWS FEED

» A 6,000-acre island paradise—in the MMO game *Project Entropia*—complete with a fully refinished castle sold for $26,500 in real-world cash! Aussie David Storey, 22, plans to buy the Brooklyn Bridge next. »

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THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

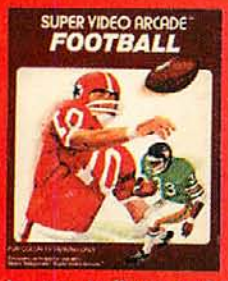
News and views from the Wild West



The Good

Mind Control

Scientists in Albany, NY, have developed a system that has so far allowed four people to move a cursor around a screen simply by thinking about it. Needless to say, this has some major implications for the future of both videogame controls and us starting fires with our minds.



The Bad

NFL Lockdown

Electronic Arts inked a five-year deal with the NFL for exclusive rights to the league's teams, stadiums, and players. Since *Madden* is the only PC football title that's worth a damn, the news here is mostly bad for console owners. Still, anyone hoping that *Diablo 3* might feature Peyton Manning is pretty much out of luck.



The Ugly

At the Movies

In an interview, Dave Callaham, the screenwriter for the upcoming *Doom* movie, stated that the film won't take place on Mars and won't feature demons from hell. Why? According to Callaham, "As a cinematic experience, we [are] never going to top *Doom 3*." Talk about setting your sights low.



SUPER

Contest Time

We got ourselves a winner

A call was sent out across the land for a hero. What we wound up with was a bunch of e-mail from *CGW* readers who at one point or another tried jumping off a roof, thinking they were supermen. Only one lucky random reader, though, earned himself a limited-edition *City of Heroes* cape (only 100 were made!) and a free 60-day game card. Alex Cambier, please step forward.

That's right, people; he doesn't need to give himself some fancy hero name. All he needs to do is strap on his "getting in the game hat," (a goofy plastic Viking helmet) and shout out the occasional battle cry when playing his 60 free days of *City of Heroes*. And, because he's a teenager who can't afford to buy a game card for himself, we're here to serve as his digital crack pusher. So a big round of applause to Alex and his super-Viking cape-wearing guy. Congrats, buddy!

CONSOLE CORNER

Swipe this from your kid brother

Not every good game comes out on the PC. We know—we find it hard to believe as well. Still, we've gotta give props where they are due. So grab this game next time you're at the store:



NINTENDO DS

Feel the Magic: XY/XX

The holidays are over! That means we can start taking the time to dig through all the console games that piled up while we were reviewing *Half-Life 2* and *World of WarCraft*—quirky stuff like *Feel the Magic: XY/XX* for the new Nintendo DS. The art style is definitely out there: It looks like *Jet Set Radio* but plays a whole lot like *WarioWare*. To say that this game is quirky is the understatement of the day.

Do you know of any other game that has you furiously tapping the screen to knock scorpions off your girlfriend?! Didn't think so. And blowing candles out by blowing on the handheld's microphone takes surreal gaming to whole new levels. Our favorite level, though, has got to be the one in which you try to make your onscreen character throw up the goldfish he accidentally swallowed. This game is so out there, you need to try it for yourself. Seriously.

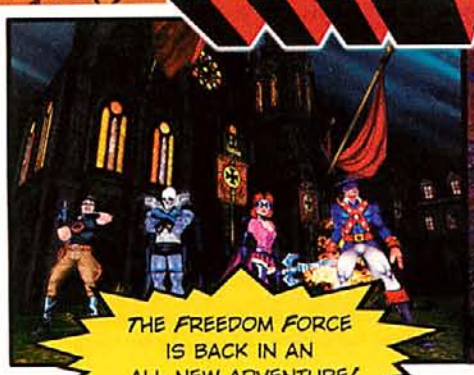
ALSO CHECK OUT: *VIEWTIFUL JOE 2* (PS2), *MERCENARIES* (PS2, XBOX)

NEWS FEED ›› **The EA juggernaut rumbles on. Not content with buying Criterion (*Burnout 3: Takedown*) and about 20 percent of Ubisoft's stock (estimated cost: $85 million to $100 million), EA is also gobbling up Digital Illusions CE, the guys behind *Battlefield*.** ››

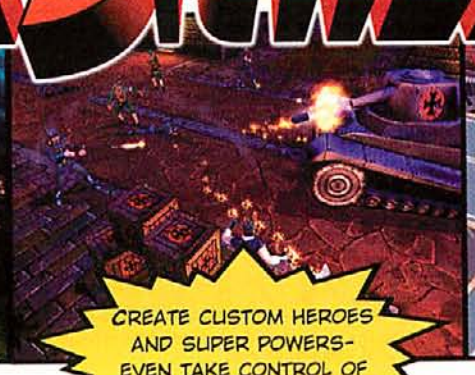
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CHAT ROOM INTERVIEW

The AIM Game

WideloadAlex : CGW Instant Message

File Edit Insert People

WideloadAlex has entered the room.

WideloadAlex: Hey hey! Just read the interview with Chris Taylor. I'll start off by letting you all know that I did, indeed, decide to wear pants for this interview.

Gizmo Gladstone: Then let me start off by saying thanks for keeping it in your pants.

WideloadAlex: You're welcome. Speaking of meat, what's today's topic?

Gizmo Gladstone: Nice segue. Life, the universe, *Stubbs the Zombie*, what's happening at Wideload Games....

WideloadAlex: I should be able to handle one of those...I think.

Gizmo Gladstone: Let's start off easy, then. ;p So, you learn lessons from your days at Microsoft, leave behind Bungie, and now start a new development house. Can you go a little into how you've decided to run things?

WideloadAlex: There were all these problems I saw that were screwing the independent developer (i.e., the company I wanted to start). So I set out to start a company from scratch that not only solved those, but also solved the problems we'd face five to seven years out. One of the most important things we are doing is our development model, which is inspired by the film industry. We are keeping our team small and creative, and bringing on contractors for production.

Gizmo Gladstone: Makes sense, considering that games are getting more cinematic and dynamic...and, quite frankly, more on par with films.

WideloadAlex: Right. And the coolest side effect is that the creative team here is just 11 people. We can have an open creative environment with NO politics. :-] And almost all the work is done remotely. The "site" is virtual--which is another important element of the process...tools.

Gizmo Gladstone: Well, I'm definitely curious to see how your first project turns out...so on to zombies! *Stubbs the Zombie: Rebel Without a Pulse*. Man, what a great idea for a game. What is your favorite part?

WideloadAlex: First, thanks! Definitely the "zombie game mechanic," that whole feeling that you've seen this whole zombie thing before, like in a zombie movie, but never from this perspective, where YOU are the zombie...KING Zombie. It's pretty neat to go into an encounter, make a dozen zombies, and take them to the next encounter--then get them all mercilessly gunned down, but in the process wipe out the humans...and then they get up and you have your zombies back! It's awesome! They're like ammo. :-]

Gizmo Gladstone: How did the idea for *Stubbs* come about? I mean, did you guys watch an *Evil Dead* marathon?

WideloadAlex: We started with brainstorming. We actually developed a couple dozen games on paper and then took our favorite five through an initial design process. *Stubbs the Zombie* was our favorite because of the character and gameplay potential. Let's just say that we weren't interested in doing another WWII shooter. :-]

Gizmo Gladstone: Absolutely, and taking the flip side--playing as the antihero--is a huge draw.

WideloadAlex: Right, and the obvious challenges beg for creative solutions--like, zombies don't use weapons and zombies aren't so bright, but if you think about it, they have some awesome abilities, like making more zombies out of people.

WideloadAlex: And eating a dude's brain is visually very satisfying!

Gizmo Gladstone: And the *Evil Dead*-ish hand that possesses people? Nice touch by the way. So, obviously, you had to go with the Halo engine for this one....

WideloadAlex: Thanks. We couldn't resist the urge to use a gun somewhere!

Gizmo Gladstone: A zombie with a plasma gun? Hmmm....

WideloadAlex: Yeah, that one may stay on the cutting-room floor.

Gizmo Gladstone: You've got a new studio and a very cool game on your hands. Why go with Aspyr as the publisher? Why not try taking your business back to Microsoft or having EA publish or something like that?

WideloadAlex: Aspyr is an awesome partner. And that's the key word here: partner. We enjoy creative and process freedom, which is critical when trying to break out of the standard mold. Also, we have the exact same goal: to make *Stubbs the Zombie* the biggest game ever. We have Aspyr's attention big time. We are not one game in a slate of 100.

Gizmo Gladstone: True enough. Prior to this, Aspyr has mostly been known for ports of old console and PC titles to the Mac.

WideloadAlex: Yeah, this is a big project for them, and they don't do a lot of original games.

Gizmo Gladstone: It's actually cool seeing other publishers trying to make it. These days, there are only a select few still around.

WideloadAlex: Yes. They've got a great crew over there. I'm damn impressed.

WideloadAlex: Hey, thanks for your time today. This is a neat way to do an interview.

Gizmo Gladstone: Thanks for saying that. I've been having a lot of fun on the past couple of these as well. Well, I know it's getting a little late out there. I should probably let you escape and unfurl your pants. But do you have any last parting shots, words of wisdom, sage advice, or random ramble you'd like to share with the masses?

WideloadAlex: Well, since we stared working on this zombie project, the phrase "bite me" has taken on a whole new meaning.

Gizmo Gladstone: Thank you and good night, folks! Ba-dum-dum! :-]

Wait? Where are you going? This page couldn't contain all the pearls of wisdom (and pants references) Alex Seropian had to offer. Seriously, he had too much good stuff to say! The only place you'll see it all is at aimgame.1UP.com.

NEWS FEED ›› The artist formerly known as Take-Two. We don't even know what to call the guys at Gathering/Global Star anymore, but you can expect big news, big acquisitions (hint: sounds like Shmivilization), and yet ANOTHER name change from the publisher this year. ››

TRUE EVIL NEVER DIES

DOOM 3

EXPANSION PACK

RESURRECTION OF EVIL



A Game By id

idSoftware.com

Developed By nerve

Distributed By ACTIVISION

MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

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■DVD
MacGyver, Season One
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Superspies, eat your hearts out. MacGyver, the only man to build a nuclear reactor with an Etch A Sketch and some elbow macaroni, made nerds cool. OK, maybe only a little cool—but you get the idea. Who knows? Maybe you can build a solar-powered engine with the six DVDs in this set.



■MUSIC
Lazy Boy TV
$13, WWW.AMAZON.COM

File this CD under "High Concept" in your collection. If you can get over the mega-cheesy, strangely sampled electronica sound, the entire disc basically feels like someone strung together all the nonwork e-mails around the office and set them to music. Weird, we know, but in a way it works. With tracks like "Underwear Goes Inside the Pants," you know you've got something special here. Give it a listen online before you buy.



■PULP
Breakdown
$3, DEVILSDUE.NET

Let's say you're the first superpowered guy in the world. You're a celebrity on TV and movies when you aren't saving the day. You're so powerful that you don't even bother hiding behind a secret identity. The problem: Your wife and kid aren't quite as powerful. Issue #1 of this comic kicks off with the main character's family getting killed. He has a breakdown and now is ready to go on a killing spree or two.



■FLASHBACK
GTA: San Andreas Soundtrack
$19, WWW.AMAZON.COM

Whether you worshiped the mullet, grooved to the heyday of gangsta rap, or listened to whatever was on the radio, it's time to relive those days again. To get you mentally prepared for the time drain that is *GTA*, this two-disc soundtrack collects some of the greatest songs of the '90s and even throws in a teaser of what is in store for the PC version of the game.



■CHOW TIME
What's Up Dog Combo
$4, WWW.WHATSUPDOGS.COM

What's better than pig hooves and snout ground and compressed into an intestine lining? NOTHING! That is why we line up like lemmings for these awesome hot dogs. It's a small storefront in downtown San Francisco but that doesn't stop us and the copyedit department from making it a weekly Mecca. Throw in a bag of chips and a Coke and we're in heaven!



■WHAT THE?
Whiplash, the Cowboy Monkey T-Shirt
$15, WWW.WHIPLASHRIDES.COM

Yeehaw! We've now officially seen it all: a monkey who wears a tiny cowboy suit and rides a dog. Celebrate the whole Whiplash experience by exploring the website. There's a bio, pictures, and even a video to be seen of this hairy cowpoke in action. When you're done, be the first on your block to order up the official T-shirt. In fact, we're gonna put it out there right now: He should be our mascot.

ON THE DL

Freebies live and direct from the Web



Rome: Total Realism
http://www.rometotalrealism.com

Rome: Total War is a great game, as long as you're not a history buff. Seriously, war dogs, head hurlers, and screeching women taking over the world? It didn't work that way, and *Rome: Total Realism* does something about it by adding accurate troops, weapons, and maps to the game to let players experience ancient warfare like never before.

Many units have new textures that are much more detailed and interesting than the ones included with the base game, but the changes and additions go much deeper than that. Recruiting troops from provinces with cultures that are similar to yours is much easier now, a number of buildings that add a new dimension to city management are included, and unit statistics are fine-tuned to make combat much more interesting and challenging. Next, download the high-resolution map. Then grab the Time Limit Negator to get rid of the annoying battle clock. When you're done, also check out www.twcenter.net.



■SNOW BUSINESS
Instant Snow
$19, WWW.SNOWONDER.COM

It's the middle of winter and you're thinking to yourself, "Why the hell are they trying to get us to buy snow?" Actually, this powder is nontoxic and turns water into snow. This may sound like no big deal right now, but just think of it. Pow! A surprise snowball attack you can spring in the middle of July!

Pocket Change: **$.00**

NEWS FEED ➔ Martin Edmondson, the founder of Reflections Studio (creators of the *Driver* series and the most recently bungled *DRIV3R*), resigned from his position at Atari's internal studio. No news of when he'll resurface to answer for crimes against game design.


"BEFORE NORMANDY
WE WERE JUST SOLDIERS."



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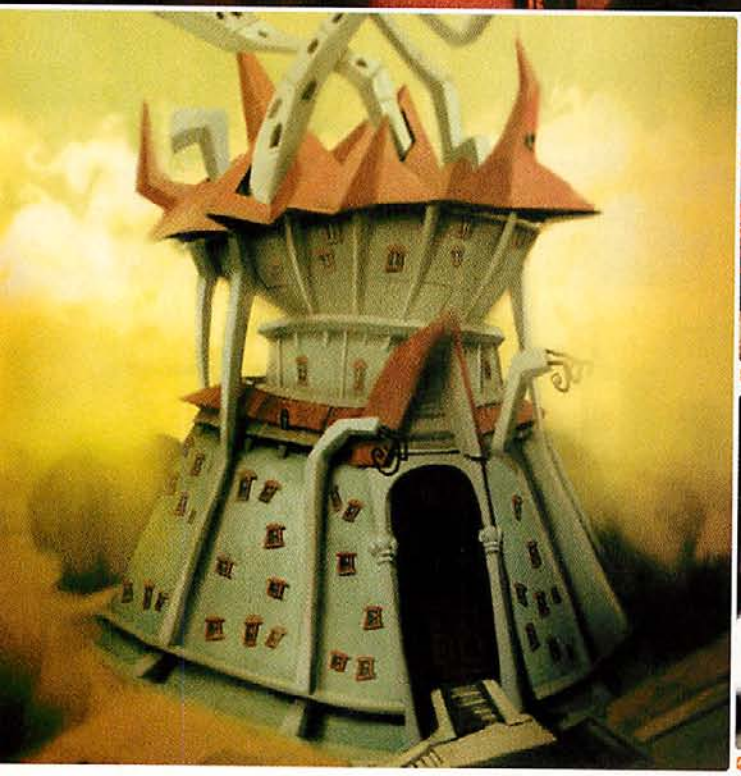
BROTHERS IN ARMS
ROAD TO HILL 30

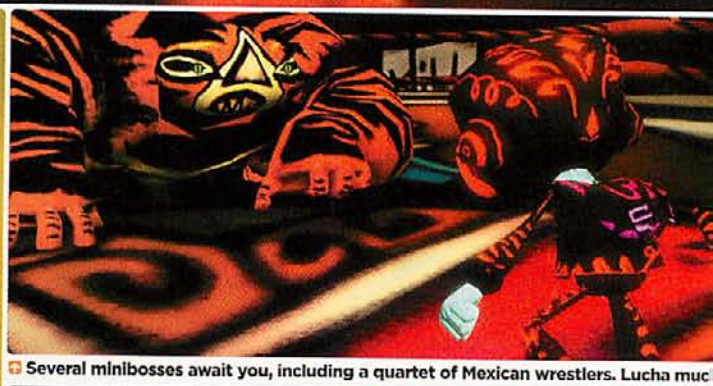
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UBISOFT™







Several minibosses await you, including a quartet of Mexican wrestlers. Lucha muc



If violence is your solution, Raz's psi-blast power gets the job done.

inside



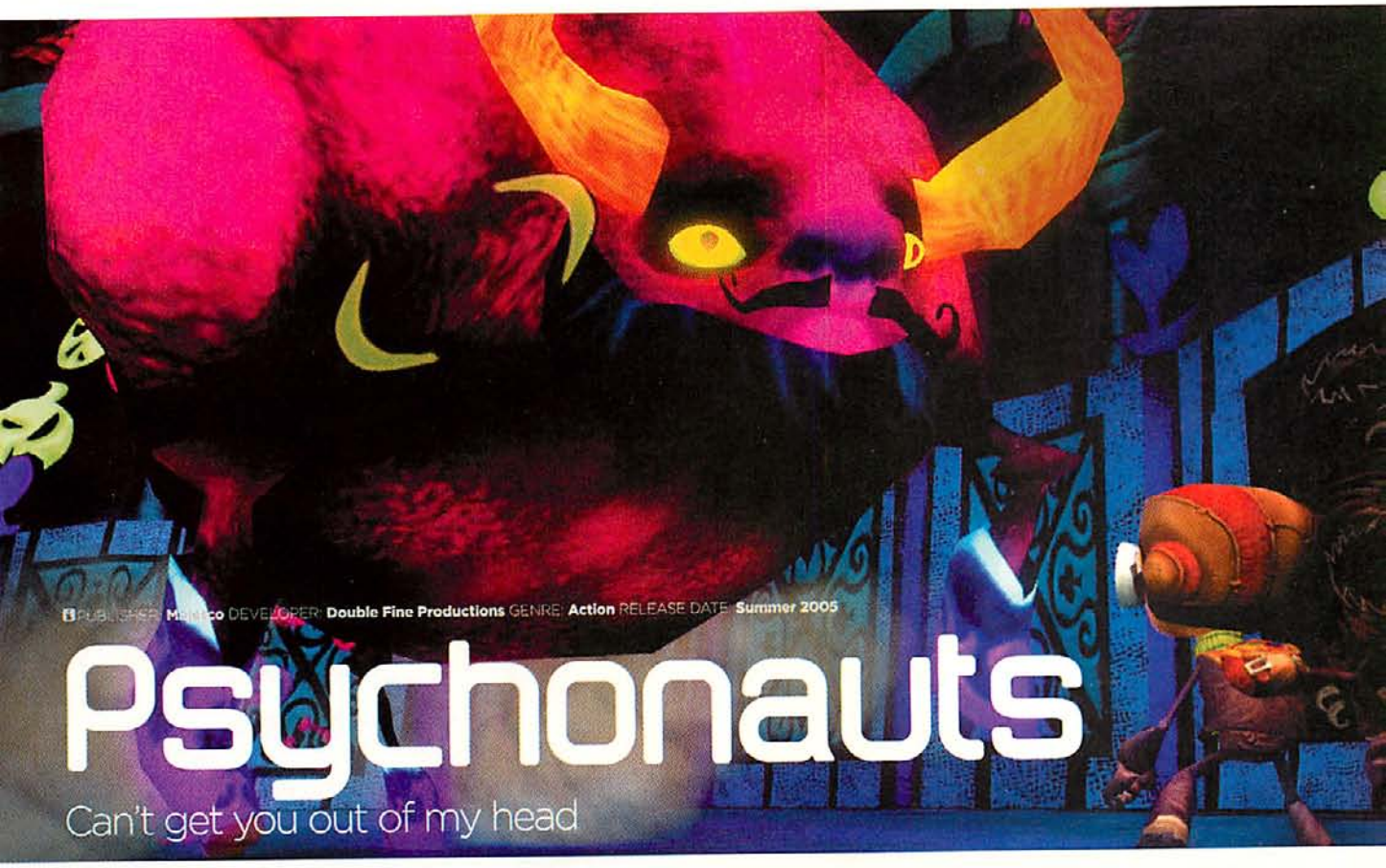
TimeShift
Atari's recently announced FPS adds new time-travel mechanics to the mix.



Battlefield 2
Watch your back, private...we're going into the trenches for a look at *Battlefield 2*'s multiplayer mode.



Act of War: Direct Action
New techno-thriller RTS features plenty of sharp, original video footage.



PUBLISHER: Majesco DEVELOPER: **Double Fine Productions** GENRE: **Action** RELEASE DATE: **Summer 2005**

Psychonauts

Can't get you out of my head

"You see, there's this legend of a monster that lives in Lake Oblongata, but the monster is really a robot controlled by a mad scientist who is kidnapping the kids at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp and-making-them-sneeze-out-their-brains-so-he-can-use-them-to-fuel-an-army-of-psychic-tanks-while-the-brain-dead-kids-zonk-out-in-front-of-the-TV...soyouhavetocollect-thebrainsandsavethem." Tim Schafer finally pauses for a breath.

Schafer, president and CEO of Double Fine Productions, is a mad genius. To be fair, that's not much of a revelation at this point—after all, we're talking about the creative mind behind such adventure-game classics as *Grim Fandango* and *Day of the Tentacle*. And as you can probably tell from his story synopsis, Schafer's upcoming 3D action-adventure extravaganza is every bit as irreverent as his previous efforts.

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS?

If the plot of *Psychonauts* doesn't pique your interest, its presentation certainly will. The game features some of the most elaborate, stylized art direction ever, with characters and locations that practically defy description. It's only fitting, considering that the main character—an acrobatic, googly-eyed psychic named Raz—goes about his mission by literally getting into his friends' heads.

That's the key to *Psychonauts'* charm: literal interpretation. You'll constantly encounter people with all manner of emotional baggage—and we mean actual luggage that you'll need to sort in order to ease their troubled minds. For example, the subject of the aptly named Black Velvetopia level is a mad painter whose anger-management issues manifest as a wild bull running circles around his psyche. It's obvious that he's a few cards short of a deck—which you'll fix by hunting down the four queens he's missing.

And that's just one of the game's 13 madcap levels. Another finds you stomping around a sea-monster-filled city as a 50-foot-tall behemoth—and the creatures are, of course, more afraid of you than you are of them. Elsewhere, you'll encounter Napoleon Bonaparte's descendant, whose failure to live up to his forefather's legacy exhibits itself as a never-ending battle against the French dictator on a *Risk*-like game board. And since his playing pieces have no confidence in him, you'll have to find ways of bringing them around.

MIND OVER MATTER

As you can imagine, there are plenty of ways to approach the oddball puzzles you'll face. While you can often solve problems through combat, Raz has an arsenal of psychic powers that open up numerous possibilities. For example, invisibility adds a stealth element to the game, while telekinesis allows you to move objects, people, and the aforementioned board-game pieces. There are eight powers in all; you'll earn them by sorting emotional baggage and collecting abstract thoughts called "figments" that are scattered throughout each level. No worries—this is anything but your typical collect-all-the-neat-but-useless-stuff platformer. "It's better than collecting bananas!" laughs Schafer. ■ Ryan Scott and Darren Gladstone

The Word: REDEFINITION

That is the key to *Psychonauts'* charm: literal interpretation.



PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Id Software** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **March 2005**

Doom 3: Resur



Little did we know at the time that *Doom 3*'s "surprise" ending was a mere prelude to this fall's onslaught of inconclusive shooters that just...sorta...end....

Hooray for the expansion pack and its plot-extending capabilities! *Resurrection of Evil* deals with matters that occur after the incident on Mars City and shows us just what Dr. Betruger has been up to.

This fellow we're looking at here is a Bruiser, and he's just one of the new minions you'll encounter on the highway back to hell. True to Id form, the creature's appendages have been replaced with heavy weaponry, and in what we'll call an "interesting" twist, his jaw has been reconstructed from a fully functional computer monitor. Yeah, he looks intimidating...until you remember that you're armed with the Artifact: a weapon forged in the fiery depths of hell that allows you to slow time and deal quadruple damage. Ouch! Andrew Pfister

rection of Evil



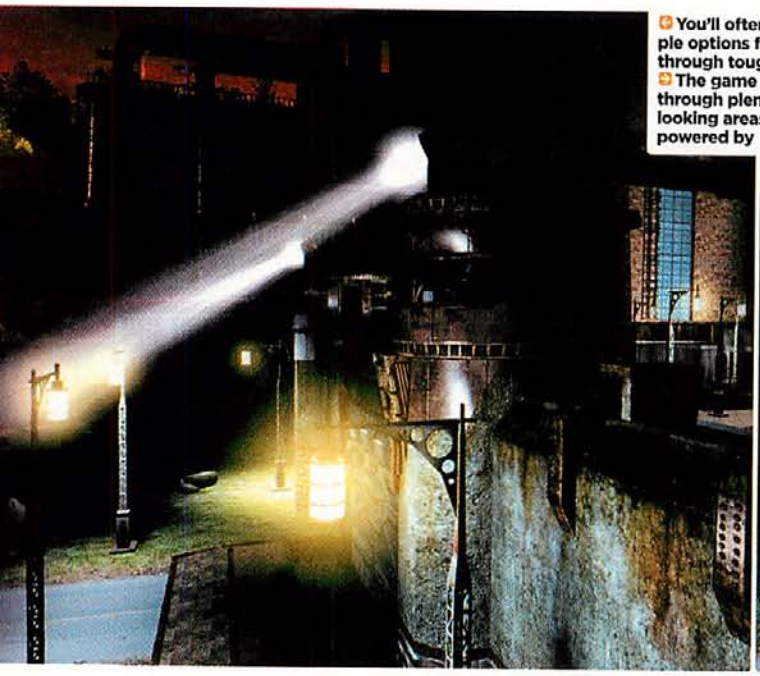
TimeShift features an abundance of cool explosion effects.

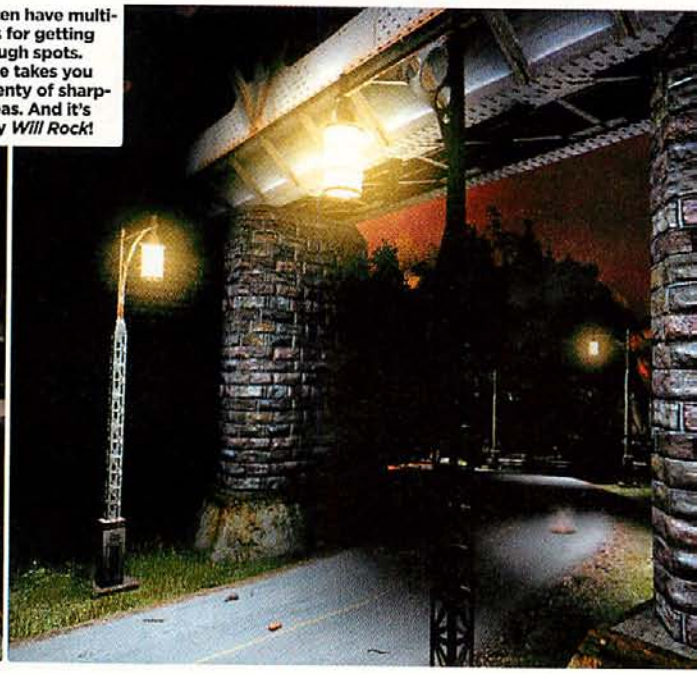


PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Saber Interactive** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2005**

TimeShift

Tiiiiiiiii-iiiii-iiiiiime is on my side





You'll often have multiple options for getting through tough spots. The game takes you through plenty of sharp-looking areas. And it's powered by *Will Rock*!



HALF-LIFE 2

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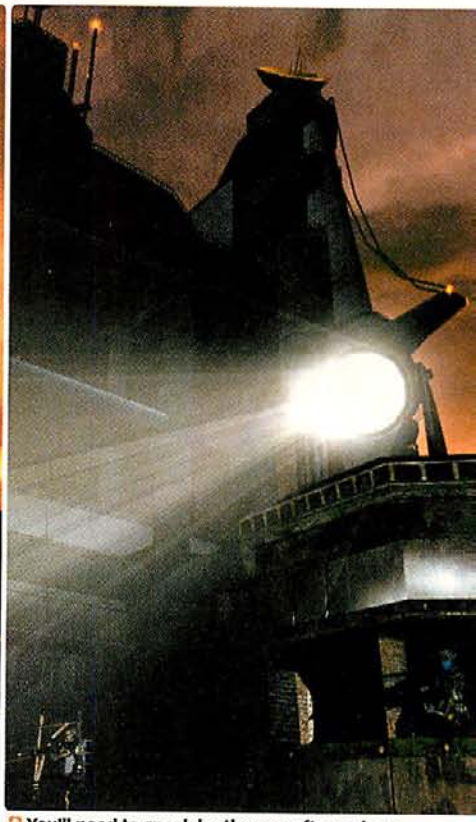
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VALVE

VIVENDI UNIVERSAL games

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You'll need to sneak by these rooftop snipers. Better hit the Pause button!

Kudos to whoever invented the Rewind button—and we're not just saying that for all the times it's come in handy during choice scenes on late-night Cinemax. It also works great for undoing blunders in the most recent *Prince of Persia* games, and now Atari is incorporating its own Rewind button into an upcoming time-travel shooter titled *TimeShift*—and taking the concept to new, innovative levels.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

In *TimeShift*, you're armed with an experimental suit that allows you to slip in and out of the time stream in short bursts. Need to distract a sniper? Sneak into the courtyard to set off a mine, then quickly hit Pause, freezing the individual bits of shrapnel in midair. Next, dart across the field and take cover. As time unfreezes, the sniper is distracted by the explosion—allowing you to sneak past unharmed. Plus it just looks pretty frickin' cool.

It's apparent here that creativity is rewarded on this killing field. If you need a quick place to hide, try smashing a box open...then crouch in position, hit the Rewind button, and watch as the box reforms around you. Perfect for stealth kills—not to mention cheap trips overseas. And some puzzles even have multiple solutions, for those of you who want to get really elaborate. Let's say your foes blow up a bridge to halt your progress. Do you: a) rewind time and snipe the demolition men, or b) freeze time and jump across the debris before it hits the ground? The choice is yours.

FUTURE IMPERFECT

But just what is the incentive for your time travels? Somebody has screwed with time, of course. A mad genius has traveled back to the 1800s with modern technology...hence all the cool steampunk paraphernalia that *TimeShift* is littered with. You'll find mechanized assault rifles and cars, not to mention steamthrowers that shoot hot air, literally melting enemies. The level of detail on this gadgetry is amazing—for example, individual cogs whir inside your various weapons, adding a nice touch of immersion to the experience.

Speaking of detail, the world itself is extremely well crafted. Leaves fall from trees as bullets whiz past, the lighting effects are glassy and smooth, and there are lots of solid texture maps. What's running this graphical wonder? Brace yourself: *Will Rock*. Yes, the game we bashed a year ago in these very pages serves as the baseline engine for *TimeShift*, thus proving that even the lamest of games can have some saving grace.

In any case, time is definitely on developer Saber Interactive's side here, as *TimeShift* is due for a fall 2005 release. Saber is currently using this period to polish the game's 32-mission single-player campaign and analyze the feasibility of multiplayer matches. We're not sure how the time-shifting mechanics might work across multiple machines, but we're definitely looking forward to the possibility of rewinding our best frags: "You like how I capped you there, buddy? What? You missed it? Let's just rewind and take another look at it then. OWNED!"

Darren Gladstone

It's apparent that creativity is rewarded on this killing field.



The Word: **TICK-TOCK**

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Your companions will follow you to the dark or light side of the Force based on your choices.

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TEEN T Blood Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT

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PIPELINE

Ship dates and slip dates for games in the stream

Game	Publisher	Expected
Act of War: Direct Action	Atari	March 2005
Advent Rising	Majesco	April 2005
Age of Empires III	Microsoft	2005
Asheron's Call: Throne of Destiny	Turbine Entertainment	Q2 2005
Auto Assault	NCsoft	TBA
Bad Day L.A.	Enlight Software	2005
The Bard's Tale	Vivendi Universal	2005
Battlefield 2	Electronic Arts	March 2005
Battlestations: Midway	THQ	Q2 2005
The Battle of Britain	Ubisoft	Q1 2005
BioShock	TBA	2005
Black & White 2	Electronic Arts	2005
Blitzkrieg II	CDV Software	Q2 2005
Brothers in Arms	Ubisoft	February 2005
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	Bethesda Softworks	March 2005
Call of Duty 2 (working title)	Activision	TBA
Carmageddon 4 (working title)	SCi	2005
City of Villains	NCsoft	Q4 2005
Civilization IV	TBA	2005
Close Combat: First to Fight	Global Star	March 2005
Cold Fear	Ubisoft	March 2005
Commandos: Strike Force	Eidos Interactive	Q2 2005
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	CDV Software	Q1 2005
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	Activision	March 2005
Dragon Age	TBA	2006
Dragonshard	Atari	March 2005
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft	Q1 2005
Dungeons & Dragons Online	Atari	November 2005
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	Bethesda Softworks	2005
Empire Earth II	Vivendi Universal	Q1 2005
F.E.A.R.	Vivendi Universal	2005
Fallout 3	Bethesda Softworks	TBA
FlatOut	Empire Interactive	Q1 2005
Freedom Fighters 2 (working title)	Eidos Interactive	Q4 2005
Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich	Vivendi Universal	Q1 2005
Ghost Recon 2	Ubisoft	June 2005
Gothic II: The Night of the Raven	JoWood	TBA
Gothic III	JoWood	Q4 2005
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar Games	Q2 2005
Guild Wars	NCsoft	April 2005

New Update



PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **Digital Illusions** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **March 2005**

Battlefield

"There is at least one thing worse than fighting w

It's too close to call. Your wingman sweeps in with a missile lock; you launch a salvo. Frantically popping flares to spoof your heat seekers, your target swerves through the smoke and fire until something sticks, scattering $20 million in Soviet-made machinery across the sky. Who did what? Turn on Battlefield TV—an in-game recording feature that lets you pan through, pivot, slow down, and pause replays from a third-person perspective—and find out. But never mind the recruitment ads: An army of one really amounts to an unzipped body bag, and there's no need to squabble about stolen kills here. *Battlefield 2* actually awards points for assists; likewise, medic and support classes make rank by respectively healing and resupplying squadmates, proving there's no such thing as a thankless hero.

Plus, *BF2* tracks multiplayer stats across servers, and its rich reward system offers plenty of incentive for professional soldiering. Excellence in the line of one particular duty earns you access to additional class-specific guns and gadgets (don't worry about the strong getting the good stuff while the weak get the worst—these weapons vary in style more than stopping power), and better yet, your overall performance might get you promoted.

An army of one really amounts to an unzipped body bag.





Some arenas feature destructible architecture. Can't hit that tank? Try blasting the bridge out from beneath it.



Wire-guided rockets make short work of fast movers. Keep your finger on the Flare key.



Warring armies include U.S. Marines, a Mideastern coalition, and Chinese militia.

2

llies, and that is to fight without them." —Churchill

"LEAD ME, FOLLOW ME, OR GET OUT OF MY WAY." —PATTON

As someone once put it, "An army of sheep led by a lion has got the edge over an army of lions led by a sheep." With 60-some players butting heads, the potential for chaos in *BF2*'s massive melees is staggering, and someone had better be calling the shots. Smart soldiers divide themselves between several squads, each with its own leader. As the man in charge, you become a sort of mobile spawn point: You'll receive orders from—and relay info to—a commander via in-game voice chat, and you can pop smoke to rally peons at set coordinates.

While squad membership increases your chances of surviving skirmishes, it's your armchair commander who'll win or cost you the war. Instead of shooting it out in the trenches, he views the world in real time from a strategic top-down vantage point, piercing the fog of war with satellite intel; pasting the enemy with artillery strikes; and air-dropping supply crates for allies—no more ammo bins for bullet hogs. Of these responsibilities, combat chatter rates the highest: In a clear chain of command that restrains troublemakers from treating headsets like open mics at the hip-hop Olympics, squads talk amongst themselves and squad leaders alone speak to commanders. Should the big dog fail in his duties, Marines can mutiny via text chat, visible to all.

Still wondering what happened? Try asking the chief. If he can't answer, get democratic and vote the dummy out.

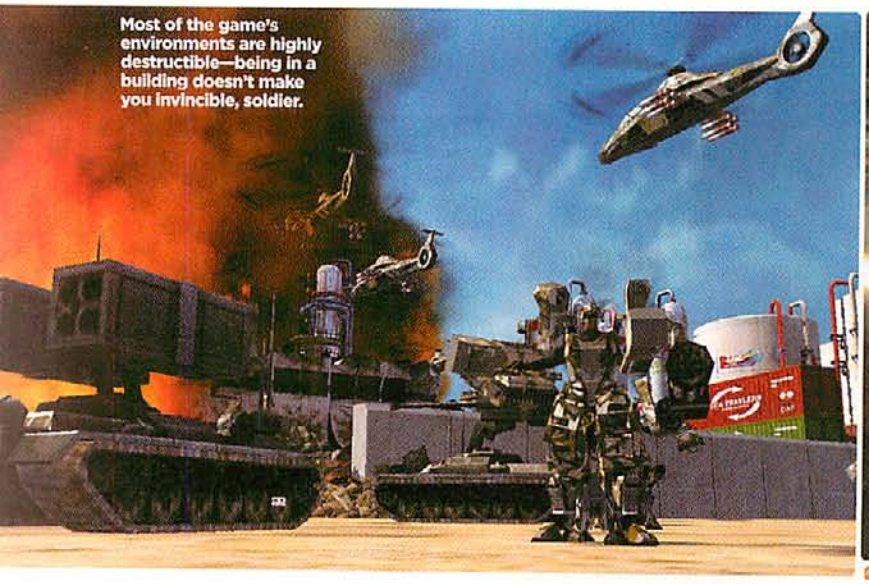
Shawn Elliott

The Word: **LOCK 'N' LOAD**

PIPELINE

Game	Publisher	Expected
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos Interactive	Q2 2005
Imperator	Mythic Entertainment	2006
Imperial Glory	Eidos Interactive	March 2005
Jaws	Majesco	Q3 2005
King Kong	Ubisoft	Q4 2005
Lego Star Wars	Eidos Interactive	April 2005
The Matrix Online	Sega	Q2 2005
Middle-Earth Online	Vivendi Universal	2005
MotoGP 3	THQ	Q3 2005
The Movies	Activision	June 2005
NASCAR 2005	Electronic Arts	February 2005
Neverwinter Nights 2	Atari	Q2 2006
Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	2006
Pariah	Groove Games	March 2005
Project: Snowblind	Eidos Interactive	February 2005
Psychonauts	Majesco	April 2005
Psychotoxic	Whiptail Interactive	February 2005
Quake IV	Activision	2005
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	Ubisoft	Spring 2005
Robots	Vivendi Universal	March 2005
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ	May 2005
Sacred Underworld	Ascaron	Q1 2005
Scarface	Vivendi Universal	Q4 2005
Serious Sam 2	Global Star	TBA
Silent Hunter III	Ubisoft	March 2005
The Sims 2: University	Electronic Arts	March 2005
Splinter Cell Chaos Theory	Ubisoft	March 2005
Star Trek Online (working title)	Perpetual	TBA
Star Wars Republic Commando	LucasArts	March 2005
Star Wars: Empire at War	LucasArts	2005
Stolen	Hip Games	April 2005
Stronghold 2	Global Star	March 2005
Stubbs the Zombie	Aspyr	Q3 2005
SWAT 4	Vivendi Universal	April 2005
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft	September 2005
Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Vivendi Universal	TBA
Tomb Raider VII (working title)	Eidos Interactive	Q2 2005
UFO: Aftershock	Cenega Publishing	Q3 2005
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	Microsoft	TBA
Warhammer Online	TBA	TBA

New Update



Most of the game's environments are highly destructible—being in a building doesn't make you invincible, soldier.



If you're into making things go boom, *Act of War* delivers.

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Eugen Systems** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2005**

Act of War: Direct Action

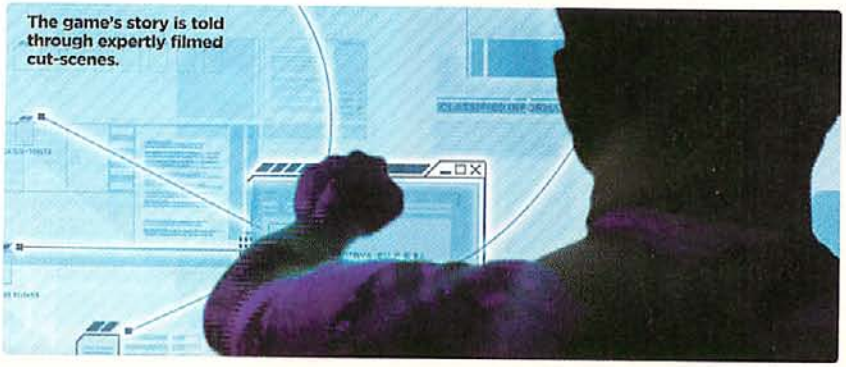
Global thermonuclear war

The real world isn't all fun and games—we live in comparatively troubled times, and our current geopolitical climate has been lukewarm at best for these past three years. One might wonder how much worse it would get if the fight were to encroach on our own soil—and that's the possibility Atari is exploring with its upcoming real-time strategy game, *Act of War: Direct Action*.

The game features an engaging techno-thriller story line, much of which unfolds in original, sharp-looking news footage and other live action. Much of the plot is the handiwork of novelist and former Air Force captain Dale Brown, with whom developer Eugen Systems has collaborated closely during *Act of War*'s development in order to ensure the game depicts realistic, hard-hitting modern tactical combat.

The action kicks off with a devastating terrorist attack on San Francisco. The president responds to the imminent threat by mustering the troops—which includes calling the boys overseas back home. Little does anyone know that this course of action plays right into the hands of a mysterious shadow group whose plans for economic domination are considerably more global and far reaching.

The president responds to the imminent threat by mustering the troops.



The game's story is told through expertly filmed cut-scenes.

WAR IS HELL

The combat itself occurs in an RTS interface that fans of games such as *Command & Conquer* should feel right at home with. As one of three playable factions, you'll wage war in a number of urban environments, using every geographic feature to your utmost advantage. Snipers can pick units off from the relative safety of buildings, aircraft and tanks can be called in to clear an area of obstacles or threats, and prisoners can be captured in order to generate ransom money—which, along with oil, acts as the game's primary resource.

Each faction has roughly three dozen units to sink your resources into, along with a unique tech tree that highlights their specific advantages. Task Force Talon emphasizes efficient tactics with powerful but expensive commando units, while the nefarious Consortium relies on large numbers of weak, expendable troops. The U.S. Army is somewhere in the middle, with flexible, well-rounded infantry and a strong air force.

Eugen is aiming for a solid 20-hour single-player experience, along with the obligatory multiplayer and skirmish modes. And it's all wrapped in a stunning game engine that—while perhaps not terribly revolutionary for the RTS genre—looks awfully impressive. **Ryan Scott**

The Word: WAR GAMES

DIGITAL UNDERGROUND The best games you've never seen



FROM: 10tacle Studios AVAILABILITY: Q1 2005

Neocron 2: Beyond Dome of York

Word on the street: Cyberpunk thrillers are surprisingly uncommon on the PC, with few decent examples. Therefore, sci-fi fans should immediately jack in to this intriguing, futuristic MMO. All the action unfolds in real time, with both on-foot and vehicular first-person combat. The game includes provisions for outfitting a character, researching item upgrades, and hacking into a high-tech VR world. Think *Shadowbane* meets *Shadowrun*.

Sounds kinda beat: German developer 10tacle Studios is just now carving out a foothold for itself. Whether the firm is ready for expansion into America is anyone's guess—and this is the sequel to a title which was never released outside of Europe. MMOs don't come cheap, either. Sans a domestic publishing partner's intervention, it's unlikely the studio has the resources required for a successful launch.

FROM: 3000AD AVAILABILITY: Q1 2005

Universal Combat: A World Apart

Word on the street: : The only thing bigger than indie darling Derek Smart's mouth? The number of spaceflight simulators he's single-handedly shepherded through production. Meet the mad genius' latest creation: an add-on for last year's most underrated interstellar adventure. It ships as a standalone retail edition or downloadable expansion, and its enhancements include new weapons (turrets, machine guns, and combat rifles), two fresh 16-mission campaigns, and a pair of original 32-player co-op challenges.

Sounds kinda beat: Lest ye forget, the ongoing lawsuit with DreamCatcher over the original game remains unresolved, which could impede this title's launch. Corporate executives aren't the only ones who may feel cheated: Apparently, little is being done that would expand the series' reach beyond its existing audience—but the faithful might appreciate the gesture nonetheless. A renowned obsessive, Derek Smart is known for rewarding his fan base with a steady stream of quality content.





FROM: 1C AVAILABILITY: Q2 2005

Rig 'n' Roll

Word on the street: If you're someone who admires the *Hard Truck* franchise, raise your hand. That makes two of us. Witness its spiritual successor, an epic that casts you as a young lad bent on controlling California's cargo transportation industry circa 2024. Speeding along behind the wheel of a semi, you'll brave the bustling highways between San Francisco, San Jose, and Los Angeles, while carting goods and competing against rival drivers. Methamphetamines sold separately.

Sounds kinda beat: High concept, it isn't. A lack of focus could present potential issues, too: Beyond simple racing challenges, you're also tasked with managing drivers and building a business. No good reason has been offered as to why the experience is set in the future, either—a warning sign that realism has been tossed out the window. The plot also promises "a conspiracy that'll test your skills to the limit." Mmm-hmm.

WRITTEN BY SCOTT STEINBERG

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

2004 GAMES OF THE YEAR

BY THE EDITORS OF *CGW*

What is there to say about 2004 other than "good riddance"? Well, OK, that's a bit cranky. But you know us: We're the cranky guys. Yay! Still, you have to admit, even if you're cheerier than us, that there were some serious lowlights for PC gamers in 2004. The closing of Sierra, Black Isle Studios, Legend Entertainment, and other great development houses. The cancellation of *Sam and Max*. The lame PC versions of cool console games like *Spider-Man 2*.

But despite a rather steady procession of bad news, the better news is that by year's end, 2004 yielded, rather amazingly, an incredible bounty of great PC games. In fact, let us be bold here and say that this was the best year for PC games since 1998, the year of *Half-Life*, *StarCraft*, and *Grim Fandango*—and to prove it, we have a bruised, bloody, and weary staff of editors who fought furiously over all the awards.

That's not a complaint. If there is even an ounce of truth to the "PC gaming is dying" mantra that's been floating around for a couple years now, then let it die like this every year—because from where we're sitting, we're in PC gaming heaven. And the games on the following pages are just some of the reasons why.







GAME OF THE YEAR

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

PUBLISHER: **BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT** DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT**

NOMINEES
City of Heroes
Half-Life 2
Sid Meier's Pirates!
The Sims 2

As we hand *World of WarCraft* our 2004 Game of the Year award, we have only two questions: What is Blizzard Entertainment smoking? And where can we buy some?

Because we want some. We want whatever it is that enables these big-brained übergeeks, working in a business park in Irvine, CA, to once again fashion a game world so insidiously addictive, so rich in imagination, so fun and beautiful and funny and charming that we have no desire to ever log out and resume our real lives. It's a hallmark of every game Blizzard makes, and though the odds were against it more than ever this time, *World of WarCraft* once again proves that it is a design house without peer, as the game is every bit as good as, or better than, anything it's ever done. And that's a freakin' miracle.

Just as it did with *Diablo* for RPGs and *WarCraft* for strategy games, Blizzard has taken a genre that was primarily a domain for the hardcore—in this case, online massively multiplayer games—and found a way to bring it to the masses without sacrificing its integrity. MMORPGs have been immensely popular before *World of WarCraft*, for sure, with games such as *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest* drawing hundreds of thousands of players. But these games have always preached to the converted. They've always spoken in code, wrapped themselves in the arcane, reveled in their difficulty. But *World of WarCraft* does what Blizzard games always do: It de-dorkifies the genre and makes it understandable and appealing to everyone. Though the rap on Blizzard is that it only synthesizes and refines what others have done, rather than revolutionize or innovate, it's a bum rap, especially this time. You want revolutionary? How about an online game that's actually more fun than work? That rewards players instead of punishing them? That stays compelling even hundreds of hours in? That's *World of WarCraft*. That's our Game of the Year.

There is a generosity of spirit at work here. In translating its immensely popular strategy franchise to an online world, Blizzard has ensured that everyone should want to come along for the ride, with heaping dollops of gameplay for newbies and "l33t" dudes alike. The generosity extends to the game's technical aspects as well, with extremely forgiving system requirements and even Mac compatibility—a rarity these days. The *coup de grace* here is that despite the relatively low-end requirements, and despite the fact that quite a few other games went out of their way this year to take advantage of all the latest bells and whistles in the highest-end 3D cards, *World of WarCraft* was, in terms of art direction, the most beautiful PC game released in 2004 by far. Eschewing 3D photo-realism for a "painterly" look that brilliantly captures the feel of the strategy games, Blizzard has created a stunning-looking fantasy world—with breathtaking vistas and sunsets, majestic mountainsides and buildings—that is a never-ending wonder to explore.

That *World of WarCraft* beat all our other nominees is further testament to its greatness, given the incredible competition this year. *Sid Meier's Pirates!* is the year's most purely entertaining single-player game, a remake of a classic that completely holds its own, a glorious amalgam of strategy, action, and puzzle solving that kept our editors up all night, as all great games do. *The Sims 2* improved upon the original in every way, an impressive achieve-



BEST CHARACTER CREATION: **CITY OF HEROES**



PAST WINNERS

2003	Knights of the Old Republic (BioWare)
2002	Grand Theft Auto III (Rockstar)
2001	Operation Flashpoint (Codemasters)
2000	The Sims (EA)
1999	Unreal Tournament (Epic)
1998	Half-Life (Sierra)
1997	Jedi Knight (LucasArts)
1996	Diablo (Blizzard)
1995	Gabriel Knight 2 (Sierra)
1994	X-COM (Microprose)
1993	Doom (Id Software)
1992	Links 286 Pro (Access)
1991	Civilization (Microprose)
1990	Wing Commander (Origin)
1989	Railroad Tycoon (Microprose)
1988	SimCity (Maxis)
1987	Empire (Interstel)
1986	Earl Weaver Baseball (EA)
1985	Ultima IV (Origin)
1984	Kampgruffe (SSI)





ment given that the first game is a design masterpiece. But the new graphics, the goal-oriented gameplay, and the ambitious foray into creating family trees knocked us out. *Half-Life 2*, everyone's default pick to win this year, is indeed a fantastic roller coaster of a ride, not as great as the original but still leagues above most other shooters. And the upstart *City of Heroes* came within one mere vote (and hours of arguing) of beating *World of WarCraft* with its fantastic superhero-based MMO gameplay. It's an outstanding game.

But in the end, *World of WarCraft* gets the victory because it's the game that reached the furthest, had the most to overcome (including our expectations), and still managed to hit it out of the park. It's the crowning achievement to date of a PC gaming house that seems functionally incapable of producing anything less than great. At a time when everyone continues to wring their hands over the future of the platform, when publishers are cutting down on PC development and sticking us with crappy ports, Blizzard, as if oblivious to all that noise, released an awesome gift of a PC game and proved once again that the only thing ever holding us back is our own imagination.

BLIZZARD HAS TAKEN A GENRE THAT WAS PRIMARILY A DOMAIN FOR THE HARDCORE AND BROUGHT IT TO THE MASSES.

QUICK AWARDS

UNDERDOG PUBLISHER OF THE YEAR: **DREAMCATCHER**

STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR (GENERAL)

THE SIMS 2

PUBLISHER: **ELECTRONIC ARTS** DEVELOPER: **MAXIS**



NOMINEES
- The Political Machine
- RollerCoaster Tycoon 3
- Silent Storm

It's a testament to how great a year it was for PC strategy games that we felt compelled to separate the real-time games into their own group. What that left was a group of excellent strategy games that couldn't be more different from one another. That's not a bad thing (just think of the diversity of Academy Award Best Picture nominees every year), but it does make judging and comparing them against one another a huge chore.

During those very crucial fall months, we were enamored with Stardock's *The Political Machine*, which let us run the 2004 presidential campaign in a way that was far more fun than its real-life counterpart. *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3* overcame the series' sophomore slump with a great state-of-the-art redesign. And Nival Interactive's *Silent Storm* almost walked away with the award because it exhibited an addictive combination of turn-based strategy and roleplaying that hasn't been so well executed since *Jagged Alliance*.

But it was the 800-pound gorilla that is *The Sims 2* that did, indeed, stomp the competition. Better than the original in every way, *The Sims 2* is a deep and complicated strategy game that is such a hoot to play, it may not even cross your mind how profound your decision making is. More than any other PC game, *The Sims 2* is a Rorschach test of our imaginations and desires and goals. Plus, they fixed it so we didn't have to go to the bathroom as often this time—that's the stuff that awards are made of.







STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR (REAL-TIME)

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **RELIC**

NOMINEES
- Rome: Total War
- Kohan II: Kings of War
- Armies of Exigo

2004 was a banner year for real-time strategy games. While each of our nominated titles was not necessarily created equal, each did make its own mark on a genre that has been largely stagnant since *WarCraft III*'s 2002 release. For us, one RTS game stood head and shoulders above all the others in this year's crop: *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*.

In our Holiday 2004 issue, reviewer Tom Chick called *Dawn of War* "a shot of pure-grade real-time strategy adrenaline straight into the veins—an absolutely dizzying rush." We can't possibly think of a better way to describe Relic's latest RTS masterpiece. *Dawn of War* excels in its category—not necessarily in terms of innovation, but rather due to the razor-sharp level of refinement it exhibits. Relic has managed to capture nearly every single aspect of the RTS experience perfectly, while expertly neutralizing many of the genre's traditional hurdles.

What's more, every piece of the game feels like an integral part of a tight and cohesive whole. Whereas most RTS titles force you to split your time between resource management and combat, these components are effectively one and the same in *Dawn of War*. The fighting is fast, furious, and constant, with four of the most fundamentally diverse factions in any strategy game. *Dawn of War* also demonstrates an impressive level of graphical detail, even going so far as to let you "paint" your army—a clever nod to *Warhammer*'s tabletop gaming roots. It all adds up to an extraordinarily well-designed piece of work—making it not only our 2004 Real-Time Strategy Game of the Year, but also one of the best strategy games ever made.



QUICK AWARDS

COOLEST MENU SYSTEM: **THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK: ESCAPE FROM BUTCHER BAY**



ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK: ESCAPE FROM BUTCHER BAY

PUBLISHER: **VU GAMES** DEVELOPER: **STARBREEZE STUDIOS**

NOMINEES

- Prince of Persia: Warrior Within
- Scrapland
- Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow
- Thief: Deadly Shadows





***The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* consists of much more than just Vin Diesel's gravelly voice rumbling through your speakers. It also happens to be the best movie prequel ever produced, a port that eclipses its former platform iteration, a slick action game with fantastic set pieces, a visual experience on par with *Doom 3*, and an opportunity to play the most hardcore antihero on the PC.**

Although you play most of it through the eyes of a digital Diesel, *Riddick* isn't just an FPS. The other nominees are very good games that tend to excel in one area. *Riddick* deftly fuses guns, sneaking, hopping, shivs, questing, vehicular homicide, fisticuffs, and harsh language into a fantastic game that constantly presents new challenges and surprises, and feels like a single game, not a hodgepodge of different genres. While it did all this on the Xbox already, the superior PC version adds a developer commentary (which will hopefully become standard in future games), graphics that have been polished even further, and even more gunplay (notably, a riot-armor sequence absent in the Xbox version).

Much ballyhoo has been made about combining games and film, and while we're finally getting competent and even solid licensed games, *Riddick* is easily both what a licensed game should aspire to and what an action game should aim for as well.

MMORPG OF THE YEAR

CITY OF HEROES

PUBLISHER: **NCSOFT** DEVELOPER: **CRYPTIC STUDIOS**

NOMINEES

- World of WarCraft
- EverQuest II

This category led to one of the most closely contested debates among *CGW*'s editorial staff. And while *World of WarCraft* walked away with our overall Game of the Year award, *City of Heroes* gets our nod as MMORPG of the Year. We don't mean that in a "second place" sort of way, either—*City of Heroes* flies high above the competition, thanks to its staggering character-customization options, its immersive setting, and hands-down the most creative use of source material we've ever seen in this type of game. And, perhaps most importantly, it really makes you feel like a superhero.

City of Heroes innovates in ways that no other MMO has ever managed to. The character-generation tool gives players an unparalleled amount of freedom, allowing every individual facet of an avatar's appearance to be customized. And you will continue to customize your character, in terms of both form and function, all the way through the game. Every new level unlocks another cool power or ability, which means there's always something tangible to strive toward—making the traditional MMO level grind much less of an issue.

Speaking of issues, *City of Heroes* packs in an enormous amount of content, thanks to the free "bonus issue" downloads that developer Cryptic Studios continues to produce. Three such expansions—each easily comparable to a full retail product—have been released so far. And with *City of Villains* coming this year, this game is only going to get better. As Darren said in our August 2004 review, "We're still playing this game night and day, long after the review is over." It's still true.



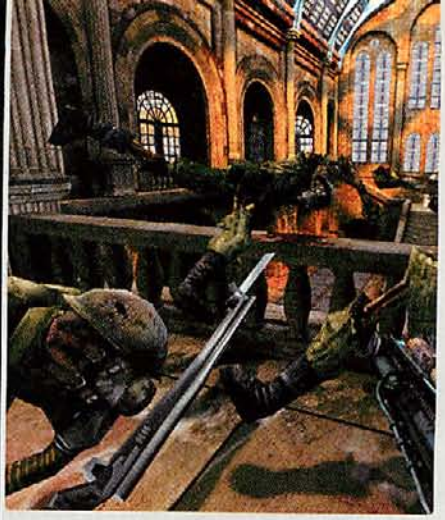
QUICK AWARDS BEST OPENING CUT-SCENE: **WARHAMMER 40,000** ➤➤



SINGLE-PLAYER SHOOTER OF THE YEAR

PAINKILLER

PUBLISHER: **DREAMCATCHER** DEVELOPER: **PEOPLE CAN FLY**



NOMINEES
Doom 3
Half-Life 2

Yeah, we didn't see this one coming, either. How closely was Single-Player Shooter of the Year contested? Over two days, multiple votes resulted in multiple three-way deadlocks. A ranking system was devised, points allotted, and we were still knotted up. But finally, thankfully, the filibustering ended, and to the surprise of everyone (including its supporters) it was the dark horse candidate that grabbed the prize.

That struggle is a testament to the overpowering strength of each of these games—honestly, you could pick any one of them as the best FPS of the year and it would be hard to quibble. *Doom 3* is a muscular triumph of gritty up-close-and-personal carnage, a game that made us jump out of our seats more than any other title this year. It didn't hurt that its game engine is simply amazing at creating the inky abyss where the game takes place. On the other hand, *Half-Life 2*'s source engine isn't too shabby, either with the wizards at Valve crafting a world in which the mood changes constantly, but is riveting throughout.

So why *Painkiller*? Why the game that was on no one's radar? Glee. Simple, unadulterated, blood-drenched, nonstop, adrenaline-soaked glee. On crack. An unapologetic throwback to a time when FPS action was all about relentless speed and carnage, *Painkiller* breathlessly delivers an incredibly distilled gaming experience that grabbed us by the brain stem and refused to let go. It's pure dumb fun—only without that much "dumb," thanks to its clever Black Tarot system and a series of optional level-specific bonus goals. As slick and polished and unique as its competitors are, *Painkiller* won the personality portion of the contest hands down, thanks to the best weapon set since the original *Half-Life* and some of the most imaginative and compelling enemies and environments reduced to ones and zeroes. We loved all three of these games, but in the end, we loved *Painkiller* just a little bit more.





SHOOTER (MULTIPLAYER)

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004

PUBLISHER: **ATARI** DEVELOPER: **EPIC GAMES**

NOMINEES
Battlefield Vietnam
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising

When Atari slapped the "2004" title on the newest *Unreal Tournament*, we didn't know what to expect. Was the publisher just cashing in on the series' name with a small leap over last year's game? Nope, Atari reclaimed the multiplayer shooter crown and redeemed the series in one fell swoop.

UT2004 saw the rebirth of the assault mode and the addition of a new control-point-based onslaught skirmish mode that rethought how battles should be fought. Plus, there's imaginative and monstrous playable vehicles you won't find in any other game. It may not be "realistic" (try downloading the Red Orchestra mod for *UT2004* if you want the ultimate *Battlefield*-ish experience), like *Joint Operations* or *Battlefield*, but *UT2004* makes up for it by providing a pure adrenaline rush.



QUICK AWARDS

WORST CANCELLATION: **SAM AND MAX**

EXPANSION PACK OF THE YEAR

RISE OF NATIONS: THRONES & PATRIOTS

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: BIG HUGE GAMES

NOMINEES

- Joint Operations: Escalation
- Call of Duty: United Offensive
- Delta Force: Black Hawk Down—Team Sabre
- Vietcong: Fist Alpha

Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patriots, the expansion pack to what was arguably the best real-time strategy game of 2003, was an easy winner. While our other nominees made solid improvements to their respective predecessors, *Thrones & Patriots* went the extra mile, trumping the original game's conquer-the-world mode with four full-fledged single-player campaigns, six unique new civilizations, and a customizable government system. As Di Luo stated in our July 2004 review, "There's almost enough gameplay packed in here for a full-fledged sequel." Truly a stellar example of what an expansion should be.







WAR GAME OF THE YEAR

BATTLES IN NORMANDY

PUBLISHER: MATRIX GAMES DEVELOPER: SSG

NOMINEES

None

SSG's *Battles in Normandy* trounced this year's competition. While other war games tended to be unplayably complicated or stupefyingly simple, *BIN* provided a rare combination of depth, accessibility, and good A.I. This operational-level look at the Normandy campaign is probably the best war game on the market and is a must-have for any war gamer's collection.





ADVENTURE GAME OF THE YEAR

MISSING: SINCE JANUARY

PUBLISHER: THE ADVENTURE COMPANY DEVELOPER: LEXIS NUMÉRIQUE

NOMINEES

- Dark Fall: Lights Out
- Myst IV: Revelation
- Wanted

It's surprising that even the adventure category, a genre that has been languishing the past few years, came up with some solid sleuthing games in 2004. *Myst IV: Revelation* became a solid front-runner for the award by polishing and refining what was in previous titles—a beautiful world to explore. But we're looking for innovators here.

Missing: Since January isn't just *Majestic* done right, it's *Majestic* done. The setup is simple enough: Two reporters are missing. The only clue to their fate is on an encrypted CD-ROM. The mood is perfectly set with expertly shot videos and Flash puzzles on the disc that make you feel as though you're squaring off against an ingenious serial killer. When you aren't deciphering clues or trying your hand at tiny twitch minigames, you'll be scouring the Internet for doctored (and real) websites that hold clues to the ultimate mystery. And even if you're having a tough time with the clues, timed hint e-mails from other cyber sleuths show up in your inbox. We can't wait to tangle with this mastermind again.

QUICK AWARDS





TITLE OF THE YEAR: **VIETCONG: FIST ALPHA**



SPORTS GAME OF THE YEAR

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 2005

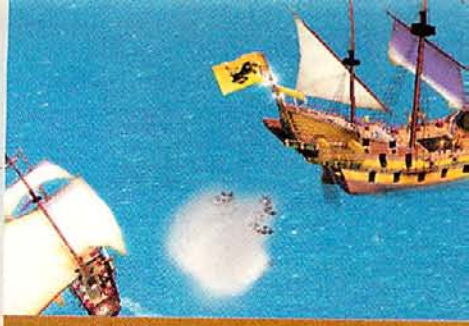
PUBLISHER: **EA SPORTS** DEVELOPER: **ELECTRONIC ARTS**

NOMINEES

- Title Bout Championship Boxing
- World Soccer Winning Eleven 7
- Tony Hawk's Underground 2

The joke goes like this: Q: What's our Sports Game of the Year? A: I dunno, what number *Madden* are they up to? But not this year, thanks to a bunch of games that elevated their respective sports in impressive ways. Sure, it's hard to think of a text-based game like *Title Bout* raising the bar, but you just try it and see. No other game capture its sport more faithfully than *Winning Eleven 7*. And *Tony Hawk*, well, it was just great, crazy fun.

But this year, *Tiger* burns brightest—it's a golf game that even nongolfers will love. Don't worry, golf-sim enthusiasts will find plenty here, but for the rest of us, there's a surprisingly accessible game driven by great character development, challenges against both fictional foes and real-life legends of the game, and a seemingly endless series of goals to drive you to play just one more round. If that's not a winner, we don't know what is.



ARCADE CLASSIC OF THE YEAR

SID MEIER'S PIRATES!

PUBLISHER: **ATARI** DEVELOPER: **FIRAXIS**

NOMINEES

- Zuma Deluxe

It's really saying something if a game is so unique and so damn good that we actually need to create a new category for it. That was the case for *Sid Meier's Pirates!*

One minute you're securing a crew and plotting trade routes. The next, you're waging battles at sea and engaging in pitched sword fights on the deck. There are other minigames as well, including a *Pac-Man*-esque event that has you sneaking in and out of enemy ports and even...a dancing game. Honestly, we didn't think this remake could do justice to the original game. But it not only captures the spirit of the original, but looks great in the process. We're ready to walk the plank for ever questioning you, Sid.







RPG OF THE YEAR

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE BLOODLINES

PUBLISHER: **THE ADVENTURE COMPANY** DEVELOPER: **LEXIS NUMÉRIQUE**

NOMINEES

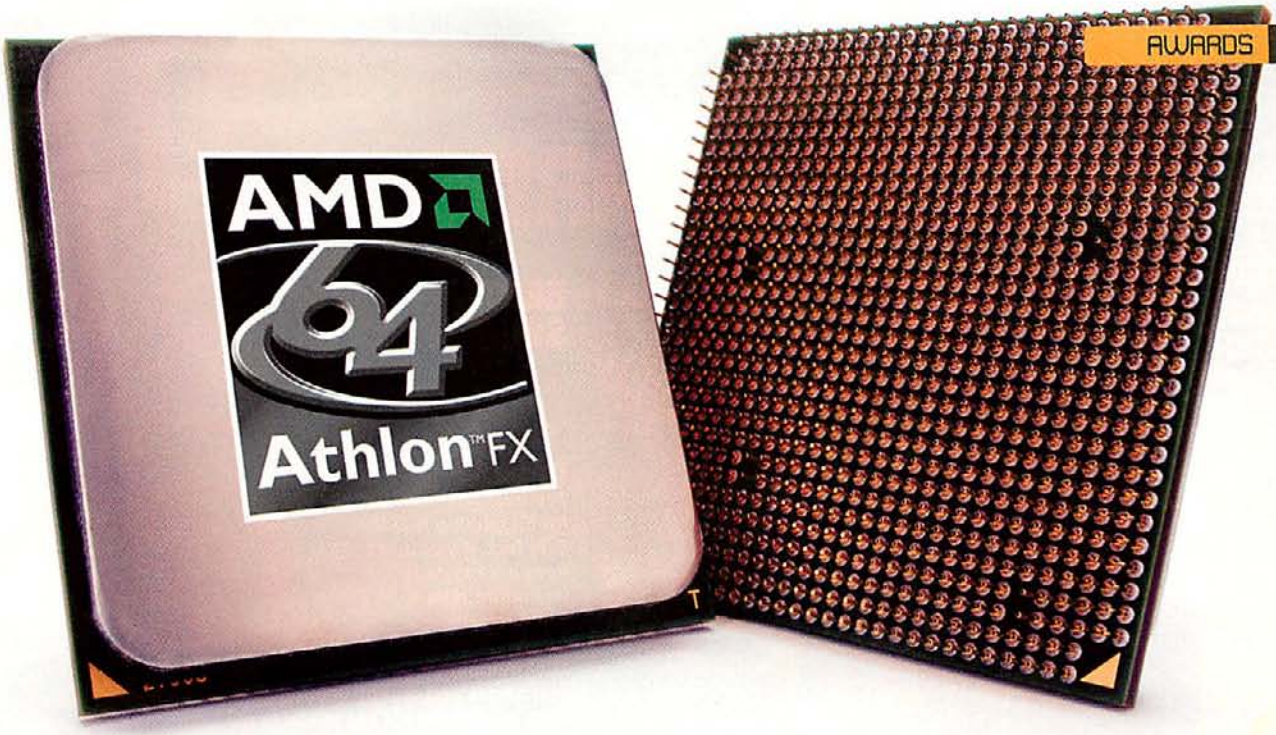
- Dark Fall: Lights Out
- Myst IV: Revelation
- Wanted

Don't let the lack of competing nominees here imply that *Vampire* won by default. *Bloodlines* would have been tough to beat even in an RPG-loaded year because it offers all the things role-players love in their games: a deep, balanced character-creation system, a truckload of interesting quests, a good story, and great NPCs to interact with. All of this goodness is wrapped in one deliciously bad package—a graphically rich, sexually charged midnight underworld populated by a wide variety of scheming, evil, and occasionally flat-out insane bloodsuckers and their hangers-on. This is a huge game that rarely misses a step during its 50-plus hours of play, a game that truly rewards players for trying to get into the head of a "real" vampire instead of merely asking them to hack their way through the game world, and that adds up to a little thing we like to refer to as "award-winning." Besides, how can you not love a game that lets you create your own personal ghoul? Exactly.

QUICK AWARDS



BIGGEST LETDOWN OF THE YEAR: **LEISURE SUIT LARRY: MAGNA CUM LAUDE**



BEST HARDWARE

AMD ATHLON 64 FX-55 SOCKET 939 PROCESSOR

MANUFACTURER: **AMD**

For the second year in a row, AMD processors nail the top honor. Why? AMD has officially beaten Intel like a red-headed stepchild by overpowering it in the latest rounds of the processor wars. Just take HyperTransport technology, with which low pin counts, low-latency responses, and reduced bus architecture create fewer processing bottlenecks and more bandwidth for the Athlon 64 FX-55.

This computing muscle dominated Intel's 3.46GHz Extreme Edition 1066 frontside bus top dog in all benchmark testing. Using 3D GameGauge games, the FX-55 scores anywhere from 5 to 20 percent better than Intel's processor across the board. The most telling part is the simple fact that the top five UGM systems all use FX-55 processors, and the top Nforce 4 SLI systems also utilize AMD.

And that's not even mentioning the FX-55's buffer overrun and buffer overflow built-in virus protection code. You practically need a chair and a whip to keep AMD's beast at bay. If you want the ultimate gaming processor, look no further.

SPECIAL AWARD

HARDWARE DESIGN



Falcon NW FragBox 2

The retooled FragBox 2, like the original, is designed specifically for LAN parties. This little gem packs a wallop with its high-performance PCI Express components, including both AMD's new Athlon 64 and Intel's Prescott-based processors, as well as Nvidia and ATI graphics card solutions. Raphael liked this design so much he bought both first- and second-gen FragBox rigs from Falcon NW. Jealous?

BEST TREND

PCI EXPRESS



PCI Express, or PCI-E for short, is the newest and most scalable and backward compatible I/O (input/output) architecture, making it useful for a variety of slick form-factor computers. PCI Express is also a hell of a lot cheaper than standard PCI I/O boards. But its massive throughput, especially with videocards, makes it the perfect technology for gaming. Look for more manufacturers to jump on the PCI Express bandwagon because Nvidia and ATI have already brought their superfast graphics cards to the PCI Express party.

QUICK AWARDS



INTERN OF THE YEAR: **RYAN SCOTT**

SPECIAL AWARDS

SPECIAL AWARDS



PUBLISHER: **DREAMCATCHER**
DEVELOPER: **PEOPLE CAN FLY**

BEST WEAPON

The Painkiller, Painkiller

In a year dominated by cool FPS titles, *Painkiller* has the coolest weapons by far: shuriken-shooting lightning guns, shotguns that freeze the undead, stake-firing firearms.... But the best of them: the Painkiller. It's a whirling Ginsu of doom that gives off a satisfyingly creepy grinding sound as you mow down the undead. The alt-fire launches out and yanks bodies closer to you, thanks to Havok physics. Actually, now that we think about it, the whole thing sounds a lot like Robert's office.

BEST WEAPON RUNNER-UP

PUBLISHER: **EA GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **MAXIS**

The Vacuum, The Sims 2

We've all got annoying next-door neighbors. They overstay their welcome, say stupid things, and generally ruin your night. In the real world, you don't have many options. In *The Sims 2*, you can buy a vacuum. A vacuum? Yep. With it you can suck unwanted houseguests up like a bunch of dust bunnies. We're trying to see if they have a Darren-sized nozzle attachment.

PUBLISHER: **VU GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE**

BEST MUSIC

Half-Life 2

This was actually an incredibly close year for judging the best music in games. *EverQuest II* has a great orchestral score. *World of WarCraft* includes some majestic tracks, most notably the one that plays the first time you enter Stormwind. But by far, the best use of music has to go to *Half-Life 2*. It helps set the mood throughout the game and ratchets up the tension to new highs. As Combine forces chase you through burned-out buildings, the music pushes you to frantically kick open doors in order to find an escape route.



BEST SOUND

PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **ID SOFTWARE**

Doom 3

The best advertisement for 5.1 gaming is *Doom 3*; in fact, if you don't have a 5.1 system, you might miss a lot of the game's subtle sounds. The grinding industrial noises and creepy echoes that resound through the Mars base really set the mood in the game, and the carefully layered shrieks and the sudden sound of pipes hissing had us literally jumping out of our chairs.



BEST USE OF A LICENSE

PUBLISHER: **EA GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **EA LA**

LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth

More than a simple RTS, *LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth* puts you right inside the trilogy's world. The battles, the presentation, and the detailed units sell the illusion and blur the line between games and film. But this award hardly comes as a surprise. After all, EA's focus is now on the Hollywood flash factor in games. This is the same company that is funding a special gaming-development part of USC's film school.

BEST USE OF A GAME ENGINE

PUBLISHER: **ENCORE**
DEVELOPER: **NIVAL INTERACTIVE**

Silent Storm

In a year of impressive engines for first-person shooters, *Silent Storm* quietly sneaked in and impressed the hell out of us. By all rights, a hardcore turn-based strategy game shouldn't look this good. Its engine calculates every detail—every broken window and bullet casing—and lets you see it all onscreen.

QUICK AWARDS



BEST TCHOTCHKE AWARD:
EVERQUEST II SWORD



BEST TREND

Good Strategy Games

Last year offered relatively slim pickings when it came to strategy games. We're not slagging *Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic*, but c'mon! Just take a gander at all the amazing stuff that showed up on store shelves this year. January saw the release of *Silent Storm*, the heir apparent to *Jagged Alliance*. Once we played it, the initial thought on everyone's mind was "Strategy Game of the Year contender." *Silent Storm*, however, was far from alone. This year saw a rebirth of the genre with not one, not two, but three really good RTS titles showing up in time for the holidays. *Rome: Total War*, *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*, and *Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth* are all great titles, and each is worth its weight in CD-ROMs. Now if only someone would pay this much attention to the floundering role-playing category that is dying a slow, painful death.

NPC OF THE YEAR



PUBLISHER: **VU GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE**

Dog, Half-Life 2

For the second year in a row, the NPC of the Year award goes to a robot. So whip out a can of Rustoleum, folks, for man's new best friend. For all the awesome facial animation in *Half-Life 2* and good voice acting (sorry, Barney), a Frankenstein robot that doesn't say a word but thinks it's a loyal puppy is by far our favorite character. We need an expansion featuring him!

WORST TREND

Bait and Switch

You've seen this tactic used for years in shady electronics stores. Advertise one thing, then, when the suckers get to the store, stick them with something worse than what they were planning to buy. Now we're seeing the same tactic being used to sell games.

Probably the most offensive example came this summer with the release of Activision's *Spider-Man 2*. The console version of the game is a *GTA*-like experience that has you sailing through a virtual New York City as you bust criminals. All the ads, all the screenshots on the box indicate that you'd be getting the same exact experience on the PC. The only thing that's busted with the PC version is the actual gameplay. It's nothing like the console version, but rather a gimpy kiddie game excreted by developer Fizz Factor (the guys behind *The Hobbit* adventure game from last year). Of course, it's our obligation to bash this game in print. We thought we were done, but THQ employed a similar tactic with *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* game. Boo!

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT IN ART DIRECTION

World of WarCraft

PUBLISHER: **BLIZZARD**
DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD**



What?!?! We didn't hand this award to *Doom 3* or *Half-Life 2*? While these games pushed technology to new levels of graphical splendor, *World of WarCraft* went in a whole other direction. Just look at the side of the game box: PIII 800MHz, a 32MB graphics card. What year are we living in, 2001? The fact that this game can look this good on a crummy notebook is great news for people who can't buy a new PC every week. *WOW* is a triumph of art direction, a vividly beautiful world we never want to leave.

SPECIAL AWARD: COASTER OF THE YEAR

Steam

For all the cream rising to the top of gaming, there must be a sedimentary layer of dead flies that have drowned pitiably whilst furiously mating upon the foamy excellence forever bobbing lightly above them. And plunging to the bottom of the barrel this year were the infantile series killer that was *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*, the legacy-incinerating *Lords of the Realm III*, and the crap of *Spider-Man 2*. But nothing stood between gaming and fun quite like Valve's migraine- and game-delivery app, Steam.

Yeah, Steam was fine for the folks who bought *Half-Life 2* online and it's "gaming's future." But if the future doesn't improve on the initial Steam model, we're ready to be turned into soylent green right now. Weeks after release, Steam is still fouling up *Half-Life 2* installations, still arrogantly commandeering our PCs and forcing us to deal with it every time we boot up, and still preventing gamers who thought they purchased a single-player offline game from playing because the online servers are down. Foisted upon unsuspecting consumers like a cold sore from a girl you initially thought was hot, Steam has earned our enmity...and our hallowed Coaster of the Year designation.



QUICK AWARDS



DARREN'S BROKEN KEYBOARD AWARD:
UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004 >>

Build. Battle.



THE MOST REALISTIC AND INNOVATIVE RTS CASTLE-SIM EVER CREATED.
IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE MEDIEVAL LIFESTYLE, LIVE LIKE A LORD, DEFEND YOUR CASTL
FROM BARBARIAN HORDES...AND, IF YOUR CASTLE IS STRONG ENOUGH, BECOME KING.









RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

www.stronghold2.com

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Become a King.
FIREFLY STUDIOS'
STRONGHOLD 2
FIREFLY
studios





The new PC-only content takes place in one of the game's power suits. It's nice, but it doesn't extend the playing time.



This game is so tough that even the health power-ups hurt.

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal Games** DEVELOPER: **Starbreeze Studios** GENRE: **Action** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1.8GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 3.7GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 3GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, 4.4GB install** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay—Developer's Cut

Model prisoner



Despite moments of gunplay, there's a heavy stealth element in the game.



No, seriously, there are big stealth sections.



The fist-fighting portions of the game are surprisingly good.



Prince of Persia: Warrior Within
No more puffy harem pants.



Armies of Exigo
EA's other RTS—the one without hobbits—is the better RTS.



Alexander
All of the movie's crappiness with none of the homoeroticism.



The guards have some nice heavy weaponry while you make do with a shotgun—good luck.
The graphics are simply amazing, creating a tough, gritty game world and a Vin Diesel as "lifelike" as the "real" one.

EDITORS' CHOICE GAMING

After a sit-down, shut-up ride to Butcher Bay, an off-world penal colony for criminals not worth sweeping under their own planet's rug, Riddick is pissed. The bounty hunter bringing him in turns his back, and you, now inside the head of the Diesel-fueled antihero, reach out and twist his skull like a stubborn knob on the door to freedom. Soon you're in a tunnel that looks like it leads to safety, only to learn that the light at its end is an oncoming train. Not a literal choo choo...just the realization that your fast break was pure fantasy, a figment of a prisoner's imagination. Escaping won't be so easy, but you're already well aware that 1) you won't be anybody's bitch, and 2) this is anything but another cynical movie-license cash-in.

PICK YOUR JAW UP OFF THE PRISON FLOOR

Inspired by the *Alien* movies' mining ships and dingy prison planets, Butcher Bay is all cold steel corridors, grease-stained machinery, and graffitied concrete, normal mapped with makes-you-want-to-touch-it texture. But the game's pitch-black beauty goes beyond the surface of things. Dim cellblocks and caverns cast deep shadows, and wary patrolmen who lose track of you in the murk turn their flashlights on foreboding recesses to root you out. (One of the game's best moments: sneaking up behind a guard who, sure that he's cornered you, talks smack, only to suddenly feel your fingers at his throat.) Unfortunately, that sexiness comes at a price: *Riddick* is a hardware hog and runs like a high-res slide show on all but the best rigs.

Slashed up, pockmarked, tattooed, and otherwise scarred; addicts, lunatics, middlemen, and contraband movers, your fellow inmates are as convincing as the scenery. Each wears his history on his face and has his own attitude and agenda to match (sometimes no more than a succinct "F*** off," but it suffices). Plus, Riddick does more than frag whom- or whatever is in his field of fire. You'll shoot craps with these guys and exchange favors for shivs. Later, when you're looking to pick a fight with Abbott, an overzealous officer voiced by rapper Xzibit, you'll have the choice to help a junkie find his fix, hunt down a snitch list, fistfight your way up the food chain, or poison a hardass—any one of these works. We're not talking *Deus Ex*-degree open-endedness, but—and this is important—the time you spend pent up gives your escape plans a sense of purpose. Breaking out means more when you've actually sat behind bars.

When you do finally get your hands on a gun, you've got good reason to use it. Rather than the usual big-bigger-biggest progression of blasters to match a tough-tougher-toughest parade of baddies, *Riddick*'s weapons locker is lightly stocked. Still, shoot-outs are fierce—your foes roll into full crouches, fall back, and fire from cover—no wait-around-a-corner-and-watch-em-file-into-your-sights stuff here.

KILL OR BE KILLED

Sometimes shooting isn't necessary, however, and that's a good thing, as there isn't enough ammo in the pen to pay everyone back. Melee combat is as versatile as it is ultraimmersive. You can turn a guard's own gun on him with a counterattack, shank him with a homemade shiv, snap his neck with your bare hands, or drop down on his head. Blood sprays and heads snap back like balls on short strings when you practically punch holes through them, and your screen shudders in a sort of visual shorthand for vertigo when you get what you give. Only the awareness that you're manically pecking at mouse buttons pulls you out of the experience.

Stealth play is seamless, too. Instead of having your HUD tell you that you're hidden (aside from small health bars that appear when you're hurt, there are no onscreen indicators for anything), your surroundings turn a bluish tint. Combine that with the power to see in night so black that it'd drive normal men to tie ropes around their waists, and you can squeak through whole sections without firing a shot (provided you don't mind some tiresome trial and error).

TIME OFF FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR

Model prisoner? Maybe. *Riddick* never manages to throw off all the shackles of first-person shooting, but before the clichéd crate- and barrel-blasting bits can bore you, the impeccably paced plot puts something fresh in your sights. Its brevity is where the game comes the closest to dropping the soap—a hair-trigger finger can blaze a path to freedom in eight hours. Even so, you'll find a stay of execution in the supercool, unlockable commentary mode (hence the latter part of *Riddick*'s ridiculously long title) that takes you on an interactive behind-the-scenes tour while you play. **Shawn Elliott**

You can turn a guard's own gun on him, shank him with a homemade shiv, snap his neck with your bare hands, or drop down on his head.

Verdict ★★★★★
Short, but sweeter than a pack of cigs and a clean pair of undies.

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Montreal** GENRE: **Action** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 2GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Prince of Persia: Warrior Within

Faster, Warrior! Kill! Kill!





For a while, there was talk that *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within* was going to be titled *Prince of Persia 2*. This would have been strange indeed, since *Warrior Within* is actually the fifth, not the second, *Prince of Persia* game—the second, released in 1993, was already called *Prince of Persia 2*. Sensibly, the plan was scotched. But the fact that it was even considered tells you something about the mindset of the people making the game.

DJ JAZZY DEATH AND THE BUFF PRINCE

In designing *Warrior Within*, Ubisoft seems to have decided it'd attract a wider audience by expanding on certain aspects of the game's immediate predecessor—2003's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*—that were new to that game, rather than on the core elements that made the series popular in the first place. For example, though all the *Prince of Persia* games have offered a combination of exploration and combat, *The Sands of Time* gave an abnormal amount of attention to the combat—over and over, the game would stop dead while you were forced tediously to fight off a horde of enemies. In *Warrior Within*, the combat is more varied, but it's also more complex, harder, and more violent, and there's more of it. The result is that *Warrior Within* is the first *Prince of Persia* game to feel like a combat game with interludes of exploration rather than an exploration game with interludes of combat.

The Sands of Time also broke out in a new direction by changing the title character from a classical hero of the *Arabian Nights* mold into a hipster youth, com-



If you've been longing for a *Prince* game with naked butt cheeks, your prayers are answered.



Insert blade in bad guy's mouth...



...and rend violently.



Decapitation, the quickest way to an M rating.



This would be a bad guy—a very, very bad guy.

plete with goatee and sassy attitude. *Warrior Within*? Well, the goatee is toned down, thank God—but the character's attitude is more obnoxious than ever, and so is the game's. One particularly annoying example: The game's soundtrack frequently abandons its period-appropriate Middle Eastern melodies for jarring forays into heavy metal-style rock.

So, clearly what I am trying to say is that I hated the game, right? Actually, no—I liked it quite a lot. But I liked it in spite of its considerable flaws, not because it didn't have any.

So, clearly I hated the game, right? Actually, no—I liked it quite a lot. But I liked it in spite of its considerable flaws.

THE ART OF WAR

What is it that makes up for the flaws? Principally, the fact that if you turn the sound off and cheat your way through the tougher fights (just do a Google search; you'll find the cheats), *Warrior Within* offers something no other current game does, namely a lush, visually compelling environment and a character with astonishing acrobatic skills who can traverse the environment with gravity-defying exuberance and grace.

Path interrupted by a chasm? Not a problem—just run sideways along the wall to get to the ledge on the opposite side. Need to get from a high balcony to the floor of a room 50 feet below? Simply stab your sword into the fabric of a hanging tapestry and hold on as you slice your way to the bottom like Errol Flynn in *Captain Blood*. The controls are fluid and easy to remember—you'll find yourself tumbling, shimmying, balancing, climbing, leaping, and swinging like a pro in no time. (This is in contrast to the combat system, which requires you to memorize combination attacks that demand the manual dexterity of a Segovia.)

Then, too, the game's settings are eye candy of the first order, and thanks to a time-travel twist, the story allows you to see many of them in two different states, both as ruins in the present and at their opulent peak in the past. The time-travel story line also leads to some clever puzzles, since you can sometimes solve problems in the present by changing something in the past.

Are these largely visual pleasures enough to make up for an incomprehensible story, an unlikable main character, an annoying soundtrack, gratuitously savage bloodletting, and (just for good measure) the occasional crash bug? Yes—but just barely. The next time around, I, for one, would like to see Ubisoft turn back a little toward the series' roots. In other words, the next game should be *Prince of Persia 6*—not *Prince of Persia 3*. **Charles Ardai**

Verdict ★★★★☆

Gorgeous and exhilarating, though needlessly gory and combatcentric.



You'll still kill hordes of baddies.



Now with bigger swords for deader enemies!



PARENTS JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND

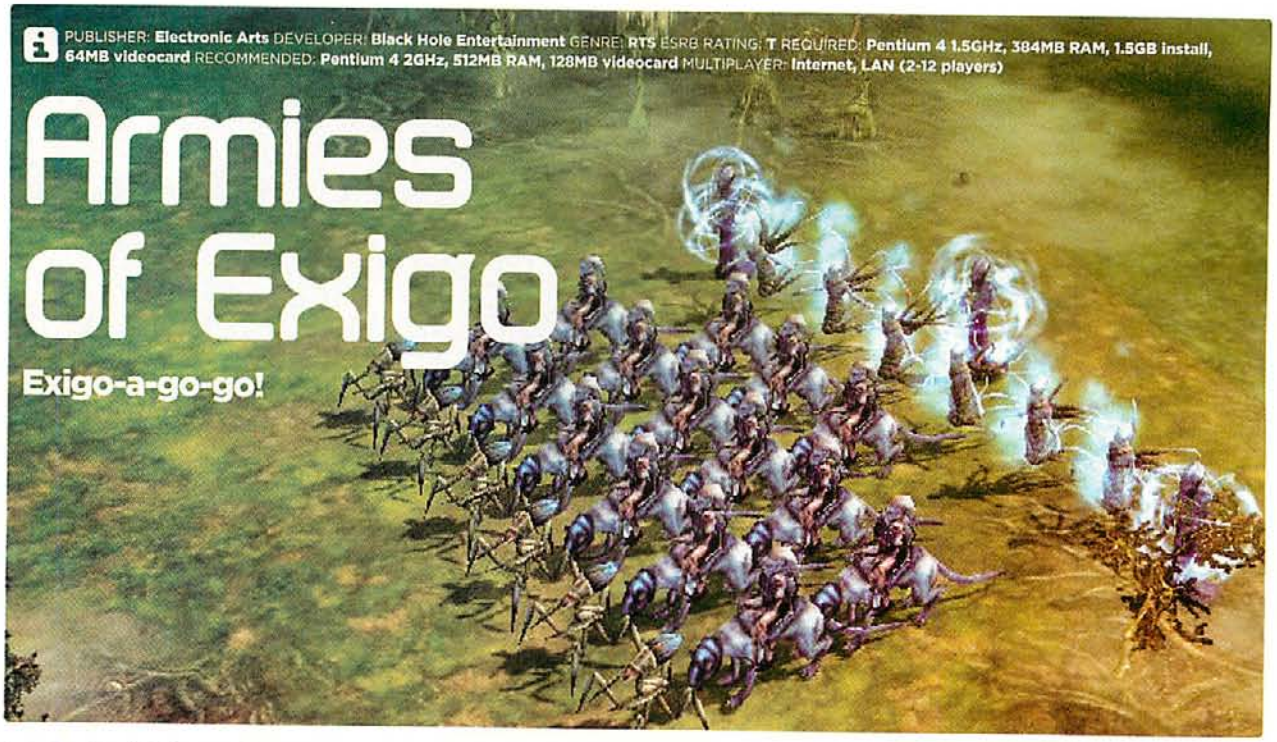
If you grew up playing *Prince of Persia* as a kid, you might be surprised to see a Mature rating on *Warrior Within*'s box—but in this age of *Grand Theft Auto*, it's the rating every publisher craves. Ubisoft earns it here thanks to the game's gruesome violence, which includes decapitations and other *Mortal Kombat*–caliber finishing moves.

There's also some mildly naughty language ("You bitch!" the Prince yells, sounding more like a *San Andreas* gangbanger than a Persian potentate) and one early cut-scene that lingers leeringly on a sexy female demon's naked ass, but it's all the blood and severed limbs that won Ubi its scarlet letter. Caveat emptor.

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Black Hole Entertainment** GENRE: **RTS** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 384MB RAM, 1.5GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-12 players)**

Armies of Exigo

Exigo-a-go-go!

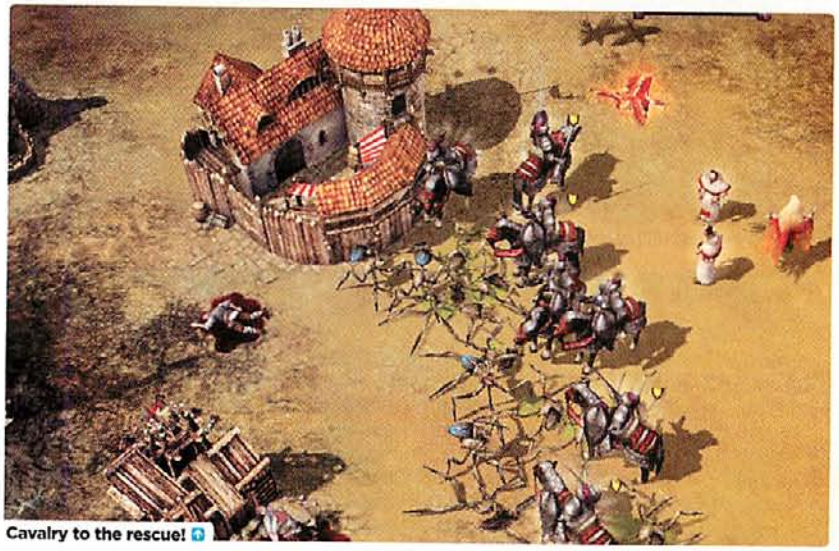


Just as it's impossible to not close your eyes when you sneeze, it's impossible to not mention *WarCraft* when you review *Armies of Exigo*. But labeling this RTS a "*WarCraft* clone" is descriptive rather than disparaging. After all, there's nothing inherently better about being innovative. Just ask Blizzard. You don't need to reinvent the wheel when you can just hone the dickens out of it.

This is what *Armies of Exigo* does to traditional real-time strategy, borrowing heavily from the look, feel, and gameplay of the *WarCraft/StarCraft* series. The guys at Black Hole Entertainment, a new development studio in Hungary, are obviously fans of old-school RTSes. And while at first glance it might seem that this is all a sleepy Eastern European retread, the truth is deeper than that. Calling it an homage, an interpretation, a clone, or even a rip-off doesn't change the fact that it's a damn fine game.

SOMETHING BORROWED

You've got three races here, all as derivative as they've always been: medieval humans, orcish monsters, and gooey chitinous insects. They play very differently from each other, and they each have enough variety that the same race can play differently depending on what you build. For instance, the beasts can opt for a basic army of cheap goblin missile units backing hard-hitting warriors, a sneaky assortment of lizards with invisibility and spell-casting powers, groups of witches who summon powerful demons, a flock of harpies that can turn enemy units against each other, giant ogres and trolls for a slow brute force, versatile flying manticores, or any combination thereof. The build tree for each race is spread wide, stretching out horizontally rather than vertically. You can quickly get to one branch or you can spread yourself thinly across all the branches. This is in marked contrast to RTSes that reserve their powerful units for the endgame. *Armies of Exigo* puts everything in easy reach and says, "OK, take your pick."



Cavalry to the rescue!

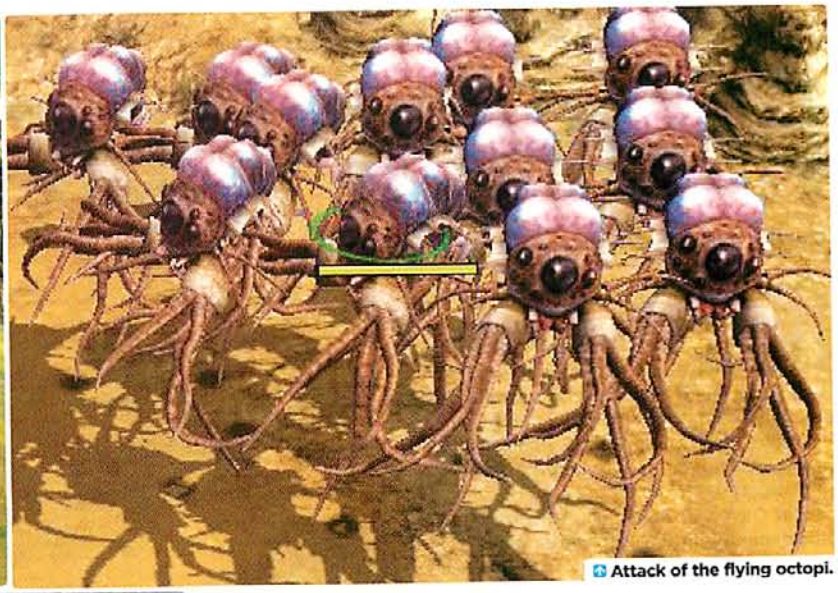
This is hard to appreciate in the single-player campaigns. The scripted missions dutifully dole out new units, introducing them one by one as an inconsequential story progresses, complete with heroes featuring unique powers and silly names. But in multiplayer games or skirmishes against the brutal A.I., *Armies of Exigo* is a muscular exercise in the importance of strategic thinking.

SOMETHING NEW

To be fair, there are plenty of unique elements in *Armies of Exigo*. There's a subgame involving invisibility in which you can see invisible units, but you can't attack them unless you have a detecting unit. Flying is handled differently for each race, which affects what parts of a map you can



A human base.



Attack of the flying octopi.



Keep your enemies close and your buffalo even closer

reach. Many maps have a separate underground area that sometimes interacts with the surface in the form of units or spells that can transition between the levels. Each race also accumulates experience differently and has different options for keeping veteran units around. Beast units, for example, earn upgrades with experience and can be resurrected at an altar if they die. Veteran human units extend powerful auras to nearby units, but you'll have to keep a priest standing by to quickly revive them if they die. Insects accumulate "hive" experience that applies to all their units.

The interface is comprehensive and slick, with all the requisite hotkeys and information displays. There's a selection limit of 15 units, but you can put unit groups into "supergroups" that arrange themselves in formation and allow for massive armies marching and fighting together. The pathfinding and tactical A.I. are top-notch, and many of the spells can be set to autocast to minimize micromanagement during battle.

For something that looks so good, *Armies of Exigo* is visually uninspired. And the sound is laughably weak, as if the developers didn't quite have enough time to get around to doing that part of the game. But when it comes to what counts—gameplay, variety, balance, A.I.—*Armies of Exigo* is good enough that it doesn't need to be unique. Tom Chick

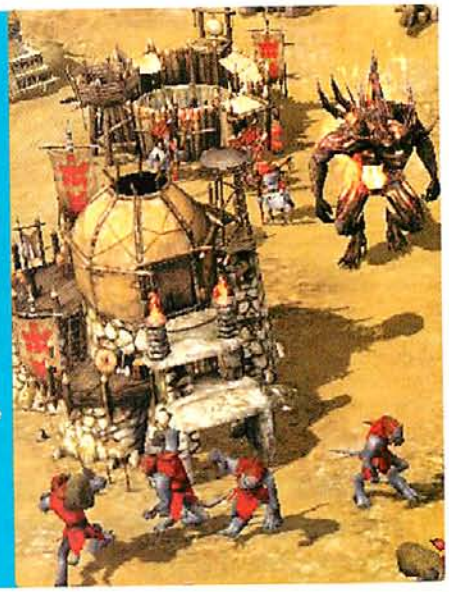
Verdict ★★★★☆

***Armies of Exigo* proves that derivative is not necessarily a dirty word.**

Calling it an homage, an interpretation, a clone, or even a rip-off doesn't change the fact that it's a damn fine game.

BUFFALO SOLDIERS

Here is just one example of the choices afforded by *Armies of Exigo*'s clever design: The beasts' army size isn't limited by farms, but by their collection of borons, big, slow buffalo created at a stable. A typical beast player will have a lowing herd off in some protected corner of the map. However, borons can be sacrificed to heal beast units. What's more, the beast missile unit is a weakly goblin with a boomerang. These guys are more annoying than deadly for how little damage they inflict. However, goblins can ride borons, resulting in a missile unit that doesn't do much damage but has a ton of hit points; the trade-off is that your "farms" are now vulnerable. This is a small price to pay for an army of buffalo ridden by cackling goblins flinging colorful boomerangs.



PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **GSC Gameworld** GENRE: **Strategy** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM, 2GB install, 128MB videocard, broadband connection for online play** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 1GB RAM, 256MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet (2-6 players)**

Alexander

From crappy movies come crappy games

Alexander the Great conquered the entire Eastern Hemisphere in his early 20s. He wasn't named "The Great" for nothing. In fact, it can be argued that Alexander's military acumen and battlefield leadership have yet to be replicated. And they certainly aren't replicated—or even approached—in Ubisoft's RTS game based on the recent Oliver Stone movie. Any hope that this game might have delivered a challenging, inspired-by-greatness RTS is lost in a mediocre combat model, an unintuitive interface, and worthless A.I. Not to mention the headache you'll get trying to install the game with an optical rewriter drive or trying to retrieve lost saved games.

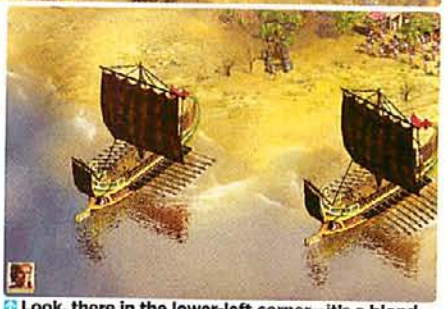


The big battles may look like a *Total War* game, but the lack of meaningful tactics means they're anything but.

CONQUEST MADE STUPID

Alexander's game engine feels like a dumbed-down version of GSC Gameworld's *Cossacks* and *American Conquest* RTS titles; both resource management and combat tactics are paid lip service at best. In this game, Alexander carves out his empire in a 16-mission single-player campaign, but there is nothing unique here. Scenarios follow a simple pattern of building, defending, or saving the town, combined with the occasional search-for-relics mission and fending off enemy hordes. While your troops march across the map, your peasants get the thrill of managing grass growing, rock collecting, and tree trimming until your empire expands. More annoying is the all-or-nothing unit production—unit production buildings are either on or off, spewing out units until you scream and stop them. There's no way to queue up limited production in order to stop barracks from churning out units or the town hall from pushing out peasants. If you're not paying attention, you could easily find a huge group of 25 to 30 workers milling around doing nothing because you were temporarily distracted—by maybe, oh, let's see, fighting—and unable to take the time to shut down the constant production.

Although *Alexander*'s 3D detail is graphically better than *Cossacks*' or *American Conquest*'s, the interface makes it difficult to manipulate the environment. For instance, workers sometimes don't follow orders, so trying to click on them to put them in the right spot is an exercise in futility. On the positive side, when you finish the main Alexander campaign, you unlock three minicampaigns pertaining to the Egyptian, Indian, and Persian kings (Nectanebo, Poros, and Darius), which can make things more interesting once you get past the marginal game mechanics.

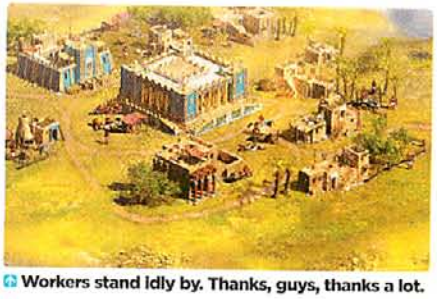


Look, there in the lower-left corner—it's a blond Colin Farrell! That wig doesn't look any better here than in the movie.

SHOCK AND BLAH

Battle is *Alexander*'s main draw, so resource management isn't as important as rushing your troops into fights. The developers claim battles as high as 64,000 units, although only 8,000 can be viewed onscreen at once. Though I never achieved this incredible number of units, I did attain an impressive mass of 10,000 Egyptian archers, chariots, slingers, and priests—who ran smack into grouping and control issues. Epic battles can be large and vibrant but lack any form of tactical punch since winning the battle is more a result of mass and aggression than tactical coordination.

Alexander also includes a bonus historical map, movie and soundtrack clips, and an interview with the gifted composer, Vangelis. Unfortunately, none of these items can save this *Alexander* from eventual defeat. Raphael Liberatore



Workers stand idly by. Thanks, guys, thanks a lot.

Winning battles is more a result of mass and aggression than tactical coordination.

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

If you loved the Oliver Stone movie, then you'll love this game. Everyone else should play *Rome: Total War* and rent *Gladiator*.

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700, 256MB RAM, 1.8GB install, 32MB videocard**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Hotseat, Internet (2-4 players)**

NBA Live 2005

Hoop-la?

An impressive, perhaps even excessive, number of the hip-hop artists featured in Electronic Arts' *NBA Live 2005* begin their thumping, bass-laden sermons by referencing both EA and *Live* itself. The message is clear, if not outright tattooed on the bodies of the electronic basketballers contained therein: This is important. Yo.

EA wants it to be important on the court, too. Marv Albert—the cross-dressing, back-biting phoenix who resurrected his career from the ashes of a sex scandal—and Mike "The Czar" Fratello call the action. There's a slew of NBA all-stars from the 1950s on up, allowing Bob Cousy to pit his magic against that, say, of Earvin Johnson. The newAll-Star Weekend fleshes out the sport to include its flashiest accoutrement, the slam-dunk competition.

For the most part, EA has succeeded in its efforts. The minutiae of the game—the squeaking of the court, the jostling between offensive and defensive players, and the crowd reactions—are deftly handled. This is perfectly acceptable, as *Live* also gets the very important stuff right. Nimble guard Jason Kidd dives for loose balls. The towering Yao Ming plods to the hoop. The Utah





Soar, Carmelo! Soar like a bright blue beautiful bird!

Jazz is like the *Lusitania*, only with more sinking and less historical significance.

Tiny improvements have also been made to solidify play over last year's iteration. The power-hop offensive move is now more easily countered, and steals are no longer a given. These improvements, combined with a fairly deep in-game play-calling system allowing players to execute various zones, traps, and presses while the clock ticks down, serve to make *NBA Live 2005* deeper and certainly less reliant on the exploitation of the game's weak spots.

A neat revamped dynasty mode offers the chance to guide a team for a quarter century. It comes complete with the curse of the 21st century, a beeping, booping bastard of a PDA that never fails to bring news of a bum-kneed power forward or a message from the owner asking why his messages have not been read. Here, those predisposed to micromanagement can squeeze out orgasm after orgasm managing budgets, selecting play styles, reading e-mails, scouting, wheeling, dealing, and scheming.

The humbling slam-dunk competition attempts to cement EA's street credibility but fails. It's just too unforgiving to be considered anything other than a flashy extra. And the message is clear: important, yes. Perfect? Not quite yet. **Greg Orlando**

Verdict ★★★½☆
What's a basektball metaphor for a medicore effort?.

PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Sports Interactive** GENRE: **Sports-Management Sim** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 128MB RAM, 400MB install**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 2GHz, 512MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-10 players)**

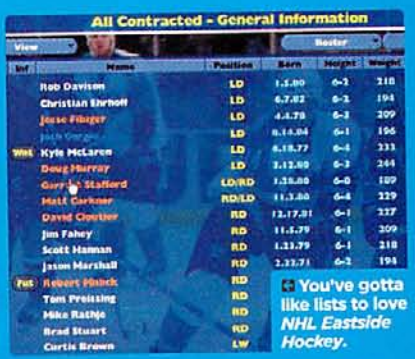
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager

The puck drops here

The NHL 2004-2005 season is most likely over, so the only hope for resurrecting a bid for Lord Stanley's Cup is through Sega's highly detailed and addictive *NHL Eastside Hockey* sports-management sim. Its meager requirements and amazing depth may ease your pain in the midst of this year's now-defunct NHL season.

NHL Eastside is about running a professional hockey franchise from the ground up. As the general manager, you'll find that putting together a winning franchise takes a combination of high-profile players, solid team strategies, and line-changing tactics. You'll control player contracts and salaries, acquire or trade personnel through free agency, scout junior leagues for upcoming stars, browse the waiver wire, and decide which players to dress each game. And just like in real life, re-signing a big-name player like Jeremy Roenick or Martin St. Louis can turn into a challenging battle with your team's often-stingy board.

Eastside's amazing attention to detail is highlighted by its database of more than 15,000 player models pooled from hundreds of worldwide teams (including obscure world leagues), each with various attributes. However, before your team starts the season, you'll have some time to host a few practice exhibitions and fine-tune your crew by running them through various conditioning drills.



You've gotta like lists to love *NHL Eastside Hockey*.

Eastside may not look as pretty or exciting as watching a hockey game from Madison Square Garden, the Pond, or Comcast Center, but it's the next best thing. **Raphael Liberatore**

Verdict ★★★★★
Best pastime for hockey fans until the NHL and NHLPA get their collective heads out of their asses.

CLONE WARS

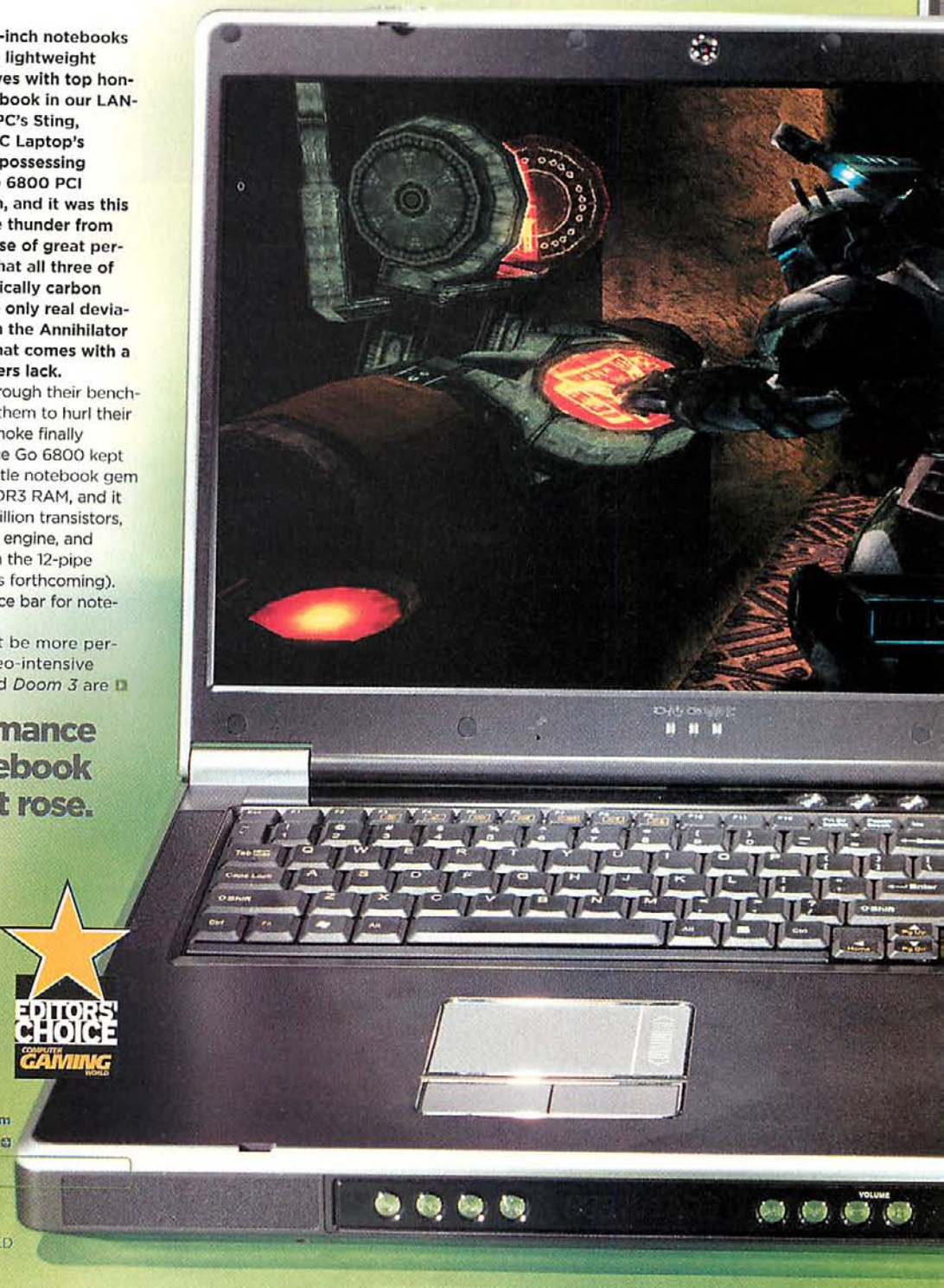
Nvidia turns up the heat with the compact GeForce Go 6800 videocard

Three hefty 17-inch notebooks enter, and one lightweight videocard leaves with top honors. Each notebook in our LAN-ready roundup—Widow PC's Sting, ProStar's 9095-1B, and PC Laptop's Annihilator 987—arrived possessing Nvidia's new GeForce Go 6800 PCI Express graphics solution, and it was this component that stole the thunder from the laptops. Why? Because of great performance—and the fact that all three of these machines are practically carbon copies of each other. The only real deviation in the three comes in the Annihilator 987's heftier price--but that comes with a lifetime warranty the others lack.

I put all three laptops through their benchmark paces, trying to get them to hurl their gaming guts. When the smoke finally cleared, the Nvidia GeForce Go 6800 kept them in great form. This little notebook gem comes with 256MB of GDDR3 RAM, and it packs a wallop with 190 million transistors, six vertex pipes, a 275MHz engine, and 600MHz memory clocks in the 12-pipe variant (a 16-pipe version is forthcoming). Simply put, the performance bar for notebook gaming just rose.

And the timing couldn't be more perfect for Nvidia, since video-intensive games like *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3* are

The performance bar for notebook gaming just rose.



EDITORS' CHOICE
COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

MANUFACTURER: **Widow PC**
PRODUCT: **The Sting** CPU: **Pentium 4 3.6GHz EE Prescott LGA 775 Processor, 2GB RAM** PRICE: **$2,775**

SCORE: ★★★★½



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D-Link innovates with a dedicated gaming router.
88



USR5470 Wireless Network Kit
This USB starter kit is simple to use, but is it worth it?
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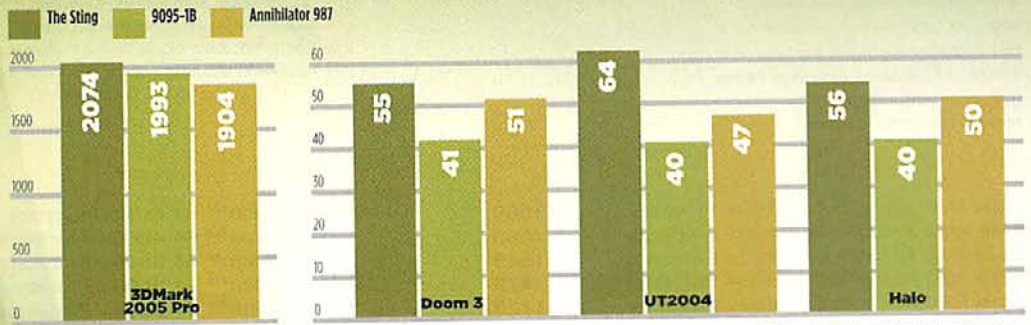


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The GeForce Go 6800 card--so small and yet so powerful.

Benchmarks



Note: All notebooks share the following specs: Clevo D900T 915P PCI Express motherboard, GeForce 6800 GT Go 256MB GDDR3 RAM videocard, DVD/RW drive (dual-layer DVD/RW drive in the Widow PC), 60GB 5400 rpm SATA HDD, external USB 2.0 floppy drive, Ethernet LAN, internal wireless 802.11g turbo card, built-in fax-modem, built-in TV tuner, built-in four-speaker system with subwoofer, and various USB/FireWire/media/audio/video ports and software

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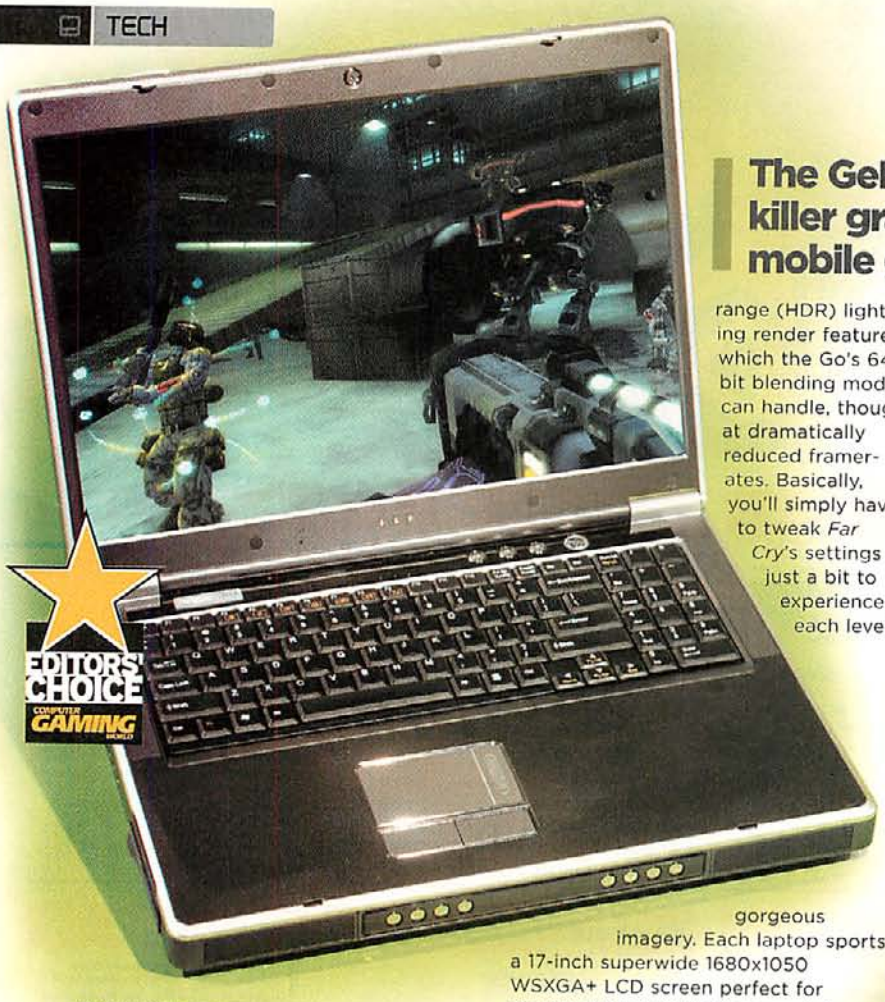


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CNET Editors' Choice



The GeForce Go 6800 is a killer graphics choice for mobile gamers

MANUFACTURER: ProStar PRODUCT: 9095-1B CPU: Pentium 4 3.0GHz EE Prescott LGA 775 Processor, 1GB RAM PRICE: $2,545

SCORE: ★★★★½

causing many notebooks to wave the white flag in surrender. Compared to a top-of-the-line Alienware laptop released just five months earlier, all three of these dominated, posting *Doom 3* scores 30 to 40fps better than Alienware's. These look-alikes are able to do this for three reasons: Intel Pentium 4 processors, 60GB SATA hard drives, and GeForce Go 6800 PCI Express videocards. The high frames were especially evident in *Doom 3*, since its shadow- and light-filtering algorithms are built into the GeForce Go 6800's architecture. Nvidia also pushes the graphics pipeline with its DirectX 9.0–friendly Pixel Shader Model 3.0, UltraShadow II, and CineFX technologies, where vertex, shadow, and pixel shaders boost the performance and quality of images on the screen, as aptly demonstrated again in *Doom 3*.

All three laptops ran *Half-Life 2* flawlessly, with every character and object rendered in crisp detail. *Far Cry* fans will be happy to know that the 1.3 upgrade patch offers the high dynamic range (HDR) lighting render feature, which the Go's 64-bit blending modes can handle, though at dramatically reduced framerates. Basically, you'll simply have to tweak *Far Cry*'s settings just a bit to experience each level's gorgeous imagery. Each laptop sports a 17-inch superwide 1680x1050 WSXGA+ LCD screen perfect for playing *Rome: Total War* or watching your favorite DVDs.

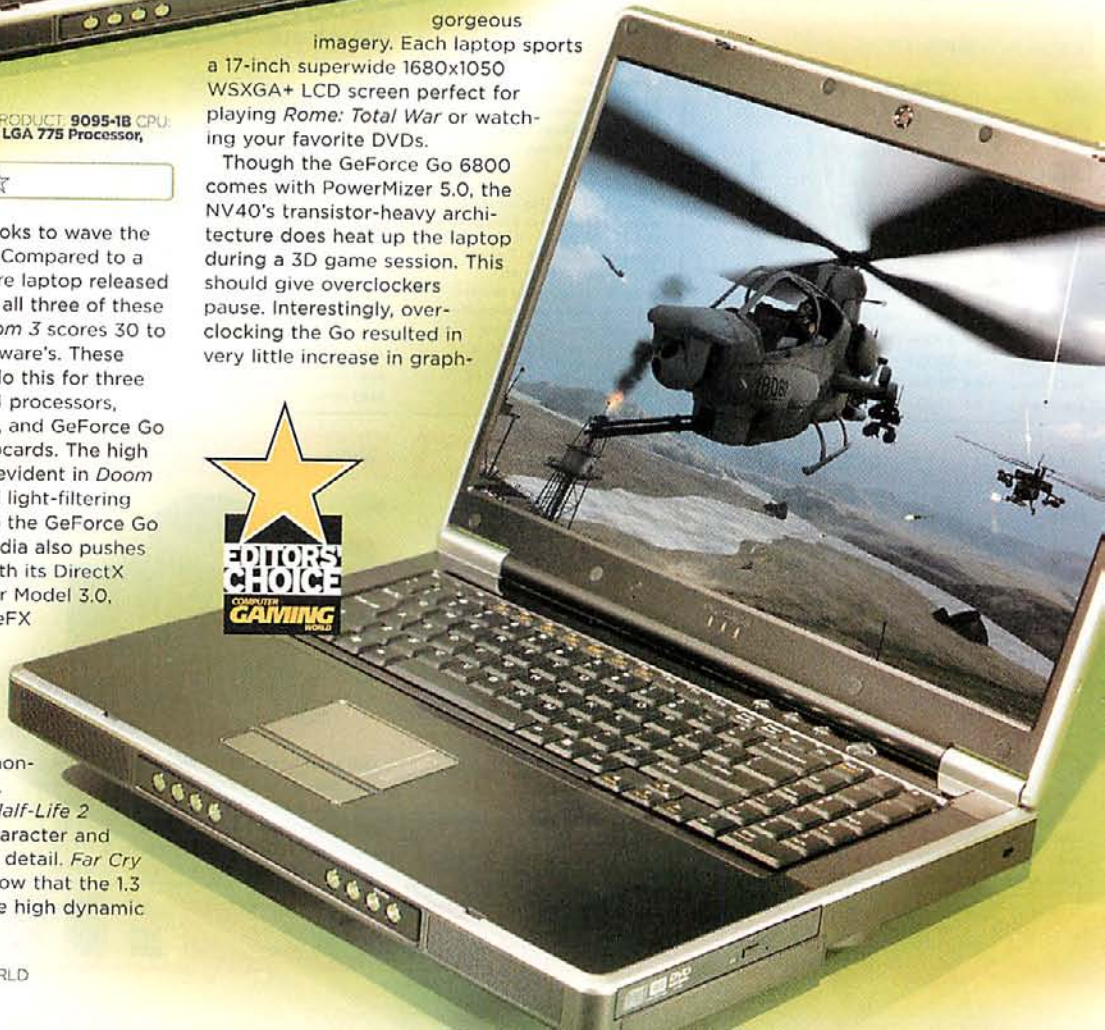
Though the GeForce Go 6800 comes with PowerMizer 5.0, the NV40's transistor-heavy architecture does heat up the laptop during a 3D game session. This should give overclockers pause. Interestingly, overclocking the Go resulted in very little increase in graphics scaling since thermal and power bottlenecks keep things more or less CPU focused. Perhaps the thermal and power concerns of the GeForce Go 6800 Desktop Replacement configuration (DTR), which boosts higher 450MHz/1.2GHz clocks, will be overcome.

Thermal questions aside, this is a killer graphics choice for mobile gamers wanting to gib with the best. In an arena once dominated by ATI, Nvidia now has the edge in the mobile gaming sector, but it will be interesting to see how well the ATI M28 design fares against the GeForce Go 6800. But for now, Nvidia rules the roost, making all three of these laptops the talk of the LAN party.

Raphael Liberatore
Photography by Arnold Tiosejo

MANUFACTURER: PC Laptops PRODUCT: Annihilator 987 CPU: Pentium 4 3.4GHz EE Prescott LGA 775 Processor, 1GB RAM PRICE: $3500

SCORE: ★★★★½



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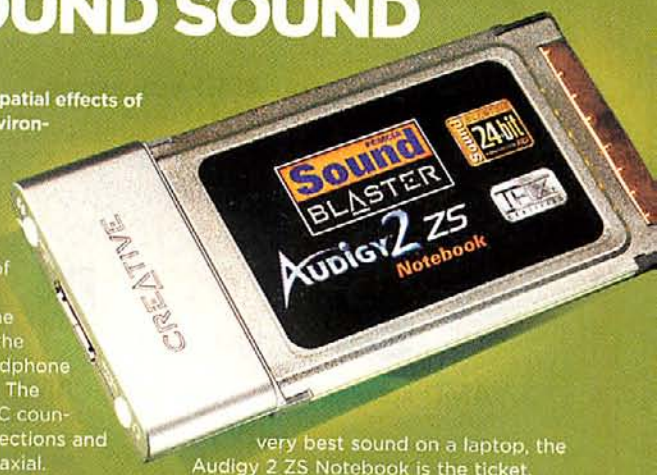
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MANUFACTURER: **Creative** PRODUCT: **Sound Blaster Audigy 2 ZS Notebook** PRICE: **$129**

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Creative brings quality sound to notebooks



EDITORS' CHOICE GAMING

Experience the same 24-bit-quality sound from your notebook that you've come to love from your gaming PC; the Audigy 2 ZS Notebook slides right into your lone PCMCIA slot and delivers the same Dolby Digital EX, DTS-ES, and THX surround-sound standards of its desktop PC Audigy 2 ZS brother in both 5.1 and 7.1 channels. It also covers EAX 2.0, DVD-Audio, and ASIO 2 standards, so nothing is lacking in the features list. Its signal-to-noise ratio of 104 decibels gives the percussion from the Blue Man Group DVD a bold and deep bass sound. It also plays the ambient game audio from *Joint Ops: Escalation*, *Half-Life 2*, and *Rome: Total War* flawlessly through its hardware-accelerated EAX mode. The card rendered the sound and spatial effects of both combat and map environments nicely on the laptop, without a hiccup in performance.

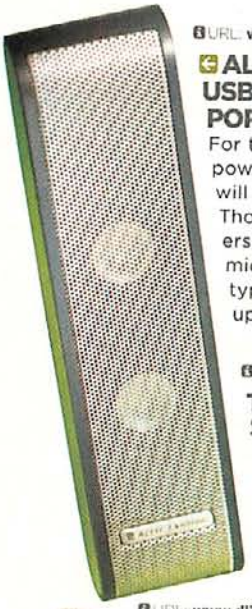
This little Cardbus soundcard packs a lot of punch, thanks to plenty of I/O slots. It provides a combo S/PDIF/headphone output, which combines the optical output with a headphone jack and a mic/line input. The only omissions from its PC counterpart are the MIDI connections and S/PDIF connection for coaxial. However, this is a small price to pay for such utility and functionality in such a tiny piece of hardware. If you want the very best sound on a laptop, the Audigy 2 ZS Notebook is the ticket.

Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★★½

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URL: **www.alteclansing.com** PRICE: **$129**

ALTEC LANSING XT1 USB-POWERED PORTABLE AUDIO SYSTEM

For those who don't do headphones, the XT1 USB-powered portable audio speakers for the laptop will do the trick without messing up your hair. Though these slim, ergonomically friendly speakers could use a little more bass, the neodymium micro drivers do offer clean-enough sound for a typical gaming session. And all this is wrapped up in an elegant carrying case.

URL: **www.targus.com** PRICE: **$50**

TARGUS USB 2.0 HIGH SPEED 7-PORT HUB

Too many peripherals? The Targus USB 2.0 hub allows you to plug in up to seven items—game controllers, peripherals, drives—to make sure just the right option is at your fingertips when you need it.

URL: **www.dlink.com** PRICE: **$109**



D-LINK AIRPLUS EXTREME G DWL-G650 WIRELESS CARDBUS ADAPTER

This is a great wireless adapter for your gaming laptop, boasting the Atheros Super G protocol, which offers serious high-speed performance.

URL: **www.targus.com** PRICE: **$59**



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URL: **www.belkin.com** PRICE: **$63**

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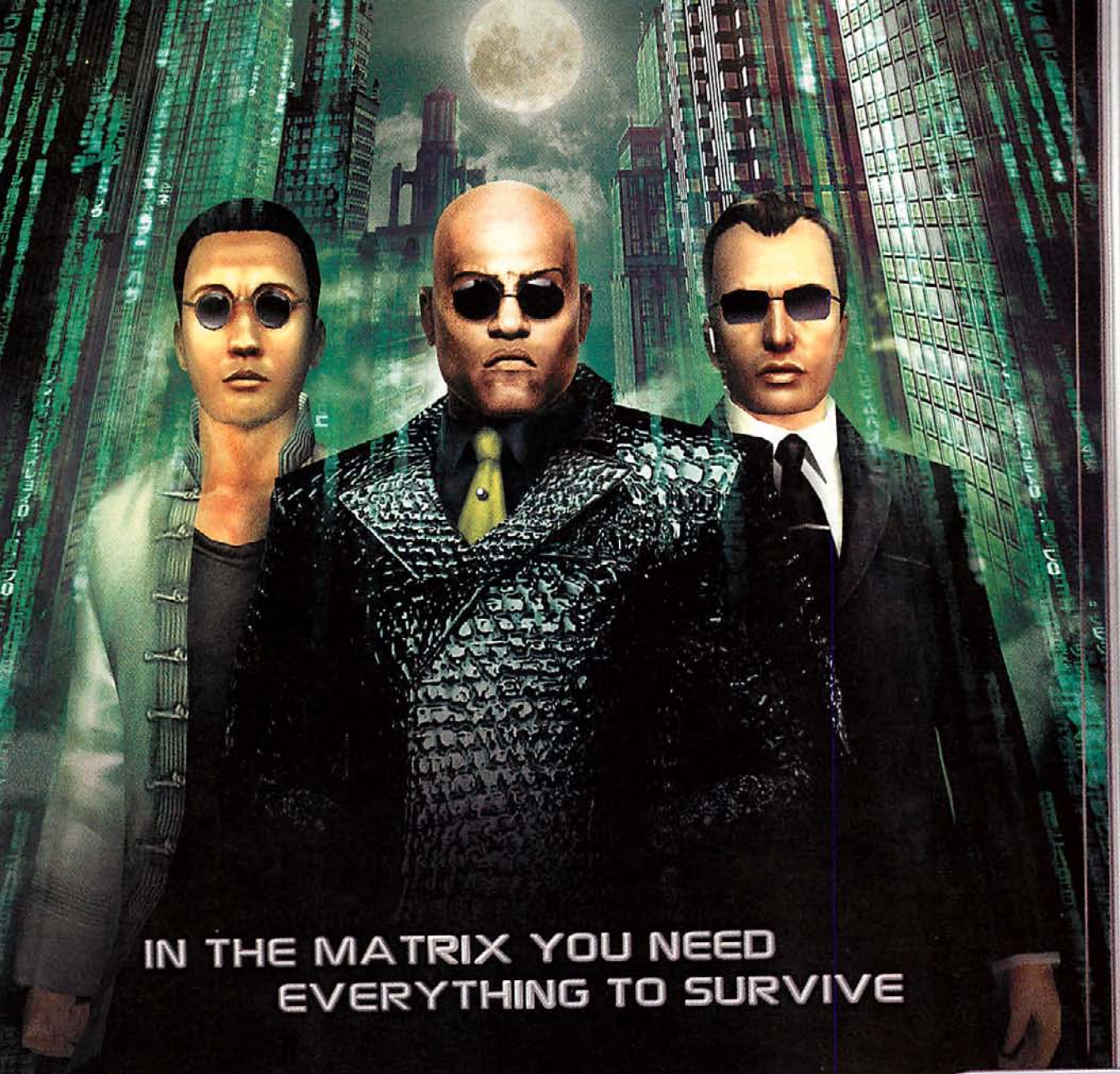
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URL: **www.belkin.com** PRICE: **$40**



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MANUFACTURER: **D-Link** PRODUCT: **DGL-4300 GamerLounge Wireless Gaming Router** PRICE: **$100**

DGL-4300 GAMERLOUNGE WIRELESS GAMING ROUTER

High-octane LAN gaming

GameFuel? Try to remember this catchy new D-Link term, because it's going to become a household word for gamers wanting the most lag-free performance from a router. D-Link's new GamerLounge wireless router incorporates the coolest networking features, game-specific performance (letting you set up protocols for specific genres or even specific games), and then some. You won't be able to resist its sleek, stylish casing, blue LEDs, and small footprint. Beyond the good looks, the GamerLounge router delivers innovation starting with the amazing raw speed of four autosensing Gigabit Ethernet LAN ports in addition to a wireless LAN moving past 100Mbps that makes lag a thing of the past. Its robust interface makes configuring the router a snap. The gamecentric GameFuel feature alone sets the bar for excellence in multiplayer gaming. GameFuel fine-tunes dedicated throughput and prioritized network trafficking via the upstream even while other heavy data-transfer loads occur. This reduces latency in a big way.

With the GamerLounge router, security is less of a concern since the Stateful Packet Inspection (SPI) Firewall filtering, NAT, VPN, Access Control, and a variety of Wi-Fi protection such as WPA and WEP keep your computers safe from intruders. As a bonus, D-Link strategically puts itself on the gaming map by offering its game-playing customers their very own support website at http://games.dlink.com.

If you are serious about eradicating lag and crave the very best networking gear, then the DGL-4300 GamerLounge Wireless Gaming Router with its Atheros Super G chipset is more than worth the hefty price tag. ⊠ **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★½

MANUFACTURER: **Belkin** PRODUCT: **Wireless Pre-N Router** PRICE: **$159**

BELKIN WIRELESS PRE-N ROUTER

Pre-N means "preview network"

Belkin is the first manufacturer to jump on the MIMO (multiple input/multiple output) networking bandwagon. Well, sort of. The product's name doesn't say "Pre" for nothing. For those who have had their heads in the mud, MIMO uses a single channel for multiple data streams using the upcoming 802.11n standard. MIMO promises to make Wi-Fi bandwidth really fast. For now, you'll only gain überrange and speed benefits when using Belkin's Pre-N adapter (see notebook sidebar) in conjunction with the router. For the maximum potential of this technology, you'll have to wait until the 802.11n standard is rolled out in 2006.

Meanwhile, Belkin offers just enough of a performance upgrade to whet your appetite. Friendly to both the 802.11b and g standards, as well as other wireless product brands, the Pre-N has three antennas that help it provide excellent coverage and range, which make for strong wireless propagation. Interference is less of an issue due to strong coverage provided by its Airgo chipset, which also keeps your wireless speed from dropping to the lowest protocol.

Belkin's router also offers the typical slate of security and firewall protocols; however, it does lack the Wireless Distribution System (WDS). Perhaps Belkin feels the Pre-N's giant range makes WDS obsolete. As a matter of fact, none of the routers we tested came close to matching the incredible range of the Pre-N. Belkin also offers a great lifetime warranty and 24/7 toll-free tech support. If you want both backward- and forward-compatible access to the Internet from long distances, and you want to stick with Belkin's quality name, the Pre-N is your ticket to the future of "N." ⊠ **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★½

MANUFACTURER: **U.S. Robotics** PRODUCT: **USR5470 54Mbps Wireless Network Starter Kit (router and USB 2.0 adapter)** PRICE: **$179**

USR5470 54MBPS WIRELESS NETWORK STARTER KIT

Wireless networking for dummies

Aside from the numerous requests I get for videocard recommendations, I get almost as many questions about networking, specifically wireless-product issues. With the exception of network admins, most people are just confused by the many terms, concepts, and products involved with Wi-Fi networks. This is why U.S. Robotics created its Wireless Network Starter Kit—containing a four-port router using both IEEE 802.11 standards, plug-and-play USB 2.0 adapter, cable, and installation guide—as a one-stop shop to bring your gaming network into Wi-Fi.

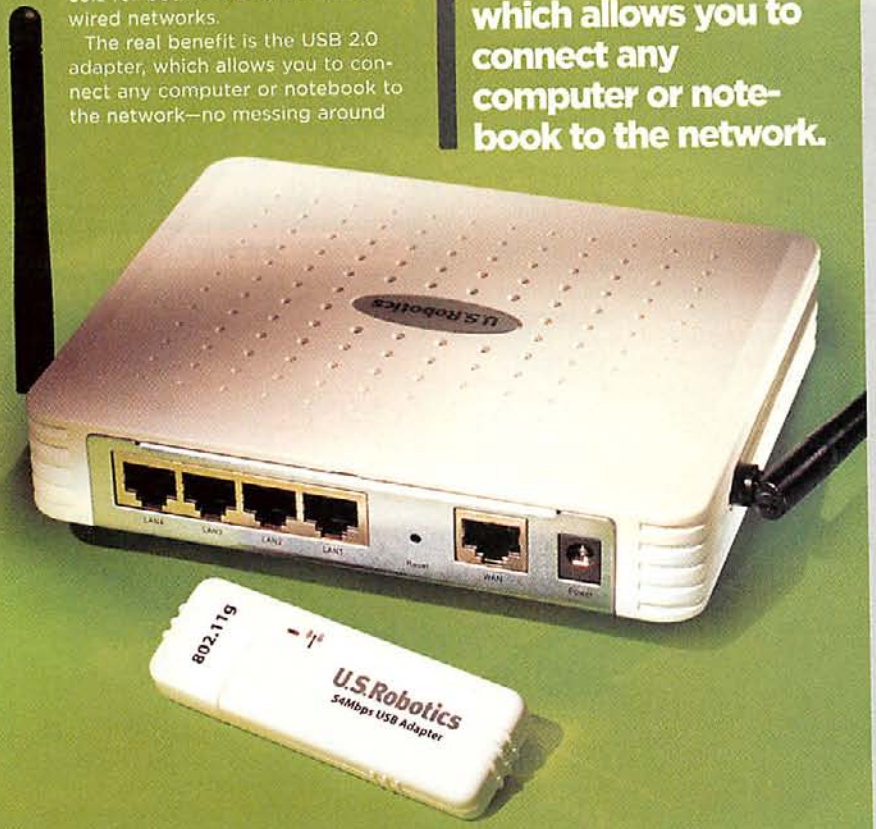
The included router (model USR5462) is a small, clunky, square white router. Setup and installation are simple, and once you get your router and adapter connected, you will discover the standard fare of router features and protocols for both wireless and hard-wired networks.

The real benefit is the USB 2.0 adapter, which allows you to connect any computer or notebook to the network—no messing around inside your PC's case. Just plug in the USB adapter, configure your network, and you're good to go. This is a good product for quick and dirty networking. Coverage, though decent, falls way short of that of both the D-Link GamerLounge and Belkin Pre-N routers. The other downsides are the meager installation guide, two-year warranty (compared to D-Link's three-year and Belkin's lifetime warranties), and Windows-only software. Still, if you wish to purchase your wireless network in one neat package or you are wireless-network challenged, U.S. Robotics' kit might just be the ticket.

Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★½☆

The real benefit is the USB 2.0 adapter, which allows you to connect any computer or notebook to the network.





Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines

LAN-tastic journey

My first LAN party was a simple gathering by today's standards. My brother, an Army buddy, and I networked three Macs, then spent 12 straight hours fragging each other in Bungie's shooter classic, *Marathon*. LAN gaming soon became such an obsession that no matter how hectic my day was at the range, killhouse, or DZ, I always looked forward to spending time fragging my brother across our little Apple network.

Later, my LAN-party network grew. I invited a number of family members, friends, and even Robert Coffey, all with rigs in tow, to the newly formed Cave. Back then, we spent the better part of the day fixing the network. Hours later, we got everyone handshaking and spent the rest of the night playing *StarCraft*, *Quake*, *MechWarrior*, and even *You Don't Know Jack* until the wee hours of the morning. After the cigar smoke settled and everyone packed up their computers and left, I wondered if our LAN gathering was a freak occurrence.

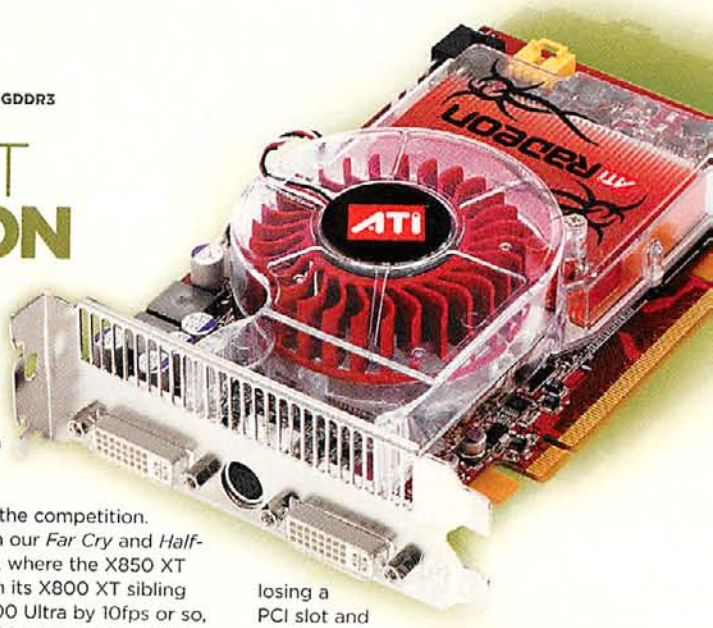
It wasn't. LAN parties began popping up everywhere, and I had a front-row seat to watch it explode into a phenomenon. This is the very reason why I created the Cave, my very own LAN party command post. From humble beginnings, I've managed to accumulate more than 35 top-performing PCs and Macs (including my Mac gaming servers), networked using two cable modems with guaranteed überfast throughput. It's gaming nirvana for those who visit. On any given day you can find several gamers—mostly friends, military buddies, and my brother—stopping in to play their favorite LAN games. Thankfully, my academic wife has found a way to make peace with my transforming our garage into the digital equivalent of the local pool hall. Even if you can't re-create the Cave, I cannot encourage you enough to start your own LAN party group. You'll find yourself addicted—just like me.

Raphael Liberatore

MANUFACTURER: **ATI** PRODUCT: **Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition 256MB GDDR3 PCI-Express VPU** PRICE: **$549**

RADEON X850 XT PLATINUM EDITION PCI-EXPRESS

Plenty of power, but at a premium



Am I alone or have you, too, grown weary of the graphics card war between ATI and Nvidia? ATI and Nvidia fight like cats and dogs, and we consumers get all scratched up in the middle of the fray. Yeah, we appreciate the ever-evolving cutting-edge graphics produced by the competition. But trying to keep up with blisteringly fast cutting-edge performance can lead to financial ruin.

Such is the case with the Radeon X850 XT PE. ATI took the obligatory next step in the graphics card war by improving the process for tweaking its 800 series card's core and memory clocks just enough to gain a nominal edge in graphics performance over the competition. This was evident in our *Far Cry* and *Half-Life 2* benchmarks, where the X850 XT outperformed both its X800 XT sibling and the Nvidia 6800 Ultra by 10fps or so, running at 1280x1 024 resolution with 2x AA and 4x AF enabled. According to our 3D GameGauge "Lite" benchmark, the graphics card top dog honors now reside in ATI's court. But is the upgrade worth losing a PCI slot and gaining only a few extra frames in *Doom 3*? Only if you've got to have the best...and have deep pockets. **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★☆

MANUFACTURER: **D-Link** PRODUCT: **GigaExpress DGS-1008D 8-Port Gigabit Switch** PRICE: **$109**

GIGAEXPRESS DGS-1008D 8-PORT GIGABIT SWITCH

For serious gaming networks only

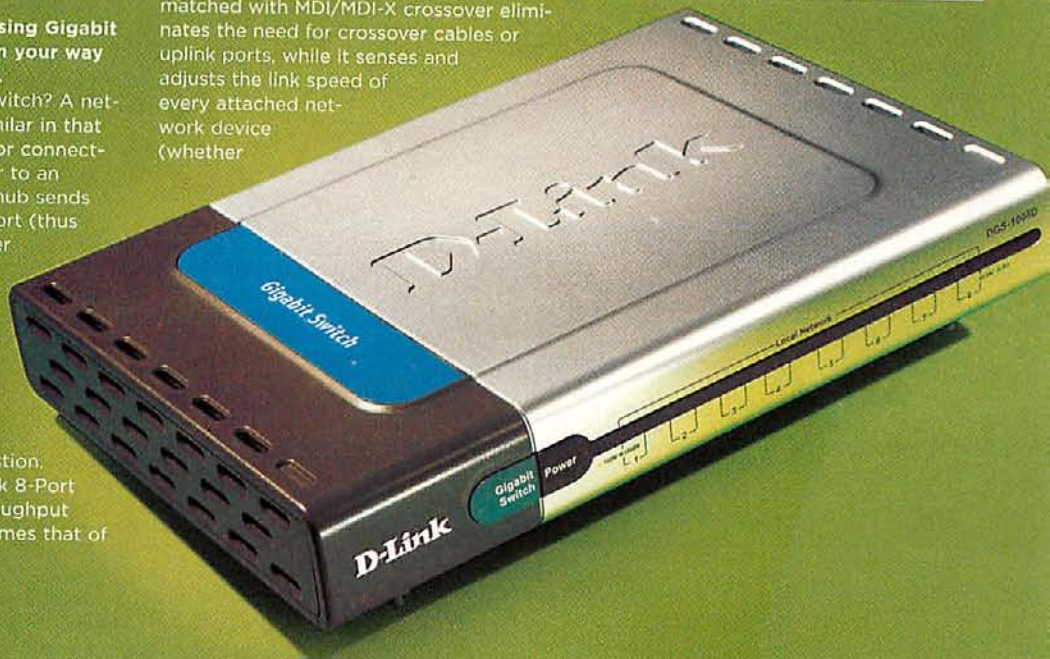
EDITORS' CHOICE Computer Gaming World

Do you want to build a high-performance gaming network? Then scrap the hub and pick up a switch instead. If you're really serious about building a performance network, then add a D-Link GigaExpress DGS-1008D, an unmanaged eight-port 10/100/1000Mbps autosensing Gigabit switch that will start you on your way to the perfect gaming LAN.

Why ditch the hub for a switch? A network hub and switch are similar in that they are multiport devices for connecting more than one computer to an Ethernet LAN. But where a hub sends duplicate packets to each port (thus sharing everything with other segments of the LAN), a switch deftly manages network traffic by filtering and forwarding packets to the appropriate segments of the network. This ultimately increases the bandwidth speed across the LAN while easing network congestion. Using a switch like the D-Link 8-Port Gigabit model increases throughput speeds to more than three times that of 10/100 switches.

The D-Link 8-Port Gigabit Switch is easy to install and features a nonblocking switching architecture and flow control at 16Gbps forwarding capacity for maximum throughput and reliable data delivery in full duplex mode. Autonegotiation ports matched with MDI/MDI-X crossover eliminates the need for crossover cables or uplink ports, while it senses and adjusts the link speed of every attached network device (whether 10, 100, or 1000Mbps). Yeah, it's a lot of mumbo jumbo, but what it all boils down to is this: If you want fast LAN speeds, then the D-Link GigaExpress Switch is a very good option. **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★½



MANUFACTURER: **Zalman** PRICE: **$50**

ZM-RS6F THEATER 6 HEADPHONES

You're hearing things



EDITOR'S CHOICE GAMING

Zalman may be best known for manufacturing top-notch cooling products for your PC, but its expertise isn't limited to heat sinks, CPU fans, and power supplies. The company also makes some of the slickest audio headphones in the industry, with the Theater 6 headphones setting the bar for premium high-fidelity sound for gaming. Everything about the Theater 6 headphones is unique, including their compact design and lightweight comfort. As a matter of fact, deep into a playing session of *Joint Ops: Escalation* I forgot I was wearing them.

The real benefit comes from how well the Theater 6 headphones' electrodynamic-type micro speakers translate the entire surround sound experience for gaming, movies, and music. Jump into *Half-Life 2* and you can literally feel the discrete localization of every eerie, nuanced sound. Jack into the *Matrix* DVD and you'll hear impressive channel separation and spatial characteristics, especially in the sonically complex lobby-storming scene in which Trinity and Neo hose the security element with an unceasing barrage of firepower. Music sounds great, too: The tonal balance of Jeri Southern's melodic voice matched beside her brilliant piano playing comes across as both natural and inviting. The lack of volume control on the headphones is the only drawback here. Otherwise, the surround-sound quality produced by the Theater 6 headphone is just phenomenal. **Raphael Liberatore**

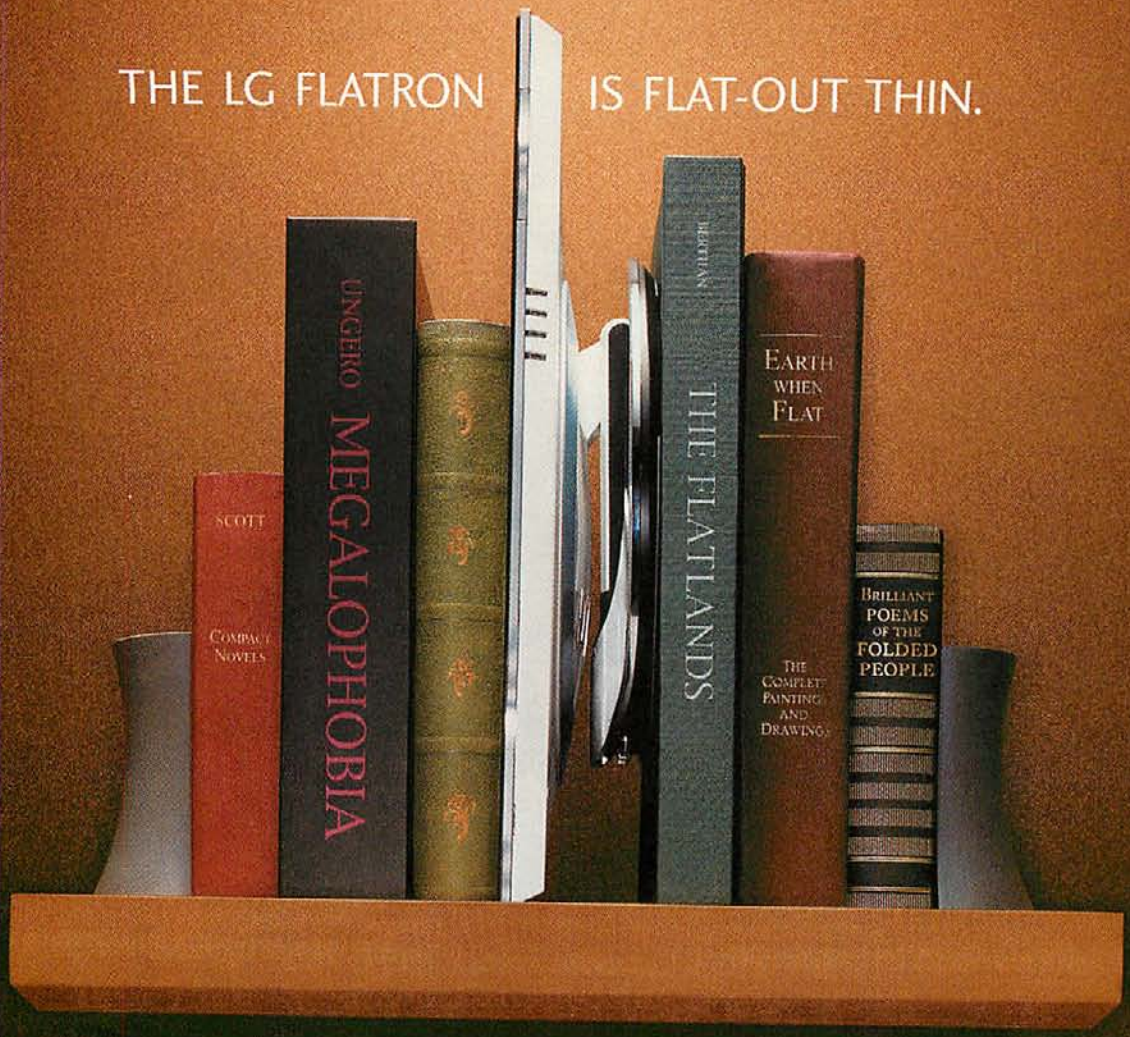
The Theater 6 headphones set the bar for premium high-fidelity sound for gaming.

SCORE: ★★★★½

GEEK SPEAK Networking mumbo jumbo decoded

LAN (Local Area Network)	A LAN is basically a collection of personal computers (nodes) connected together via a network and able to communicate with one another. Developed in the 1970s by Xerox, in collaboration with DEC and Intel, a LAN supports anywhere from 10 (10Base-T) to 1000 (Gigabit) Mbps (megabits per second) transfer rates and is usually within a relatively small area, such as a building. There are a number of LAN types, with Ethernet being most common for gaming.
TCP (Transmission Control Protocol)	A major networking protocol for TCP/IP. When two hosts exchange data, TCP controls data and packet delivery, then directs them in the order they were received.
MAC Address (Media Access Control Address)	The unique hardware address identifier possessed by each node or computer connected to the network.
802.11g	Part of the IEEE technology which specifies a Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity) or over-the-air interface between wireless clients and/or base stations across a LAN. The 802.11g protocol provides twenty-plus Mbps transmission speeds in the 2.4GHz band under either the frequency hopping spread (FHSS) or direct sequence spread (DSSS) spectrums.
Mbps/MBps	Megabits or megabytes per second is a data rate measurement detailing the transmission speed from one computer or device to another.

THE LG FLATRON IS FLAT-OUT THIN.




WALL MOUNTED (front view)


SLIM SCREEN


INTEGRATED PORTS


90° TILT (auto image flip)


PORTRAIT

INTRODUCING THE NEW 80 SERIES LCD FLATRON™ MONITOR FROM LG; the slimmest flatscreen in its class. Its *f*·ENGINE™ technology features the first LCD picture-enhancing chip to provide not only astounding color, but superb contrast and image quality. To see all the LG LCD monitors in sizes ranging from 15"–30," visit LGusa.com.

LG

Life's Good

3 YEAR WARRANTY

f·ENGINE

L1980U model shown

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Check Out











Inside

So we lied when we said you'd never see another intro paragraph here. Because of your overwhelming response to last month's ultimatum (200 emails and counting), we've put together another rockin' Killer Rig and A-List, and a blow-by-blow guide on how to become a master strategist in *Kohan II: Kings of War*. There's even another installment of the Chronicles of Eggbert, the continuing adventures of Jeff Green's hapless yet lovable gnome through *World of WarCraft*.

Killer Rig

Built to move, priced to shock

This month's Killer Rig was once a blazing-fast small form-factor performer from Maingear. However, time has turned this former LAN-party gem into a bookend for two dozen Army field manuals and old history books. Still, the X-Cube had decent-enough guts for at least another year or two of gaming, so the decision to upgrade this computer for extended LAN fun was an easy one. When upgrading Shuttle-based XPC rigs like this Maingear or the original FragBox, space, overheating, and power consumption have to be taken into account. Choosing the wrong type of components could make for a very bad outcome. It can also make an expensive proposition even more expensive.

The first item out was the 220-watt power supply, replaced by a 300-watt micro-ATX solution from Ahanix. This allowed me to swap the ATI Radeon 9600 XT 128MB DDR RAM videocard with the Radeon X800 PRO 256MB DDR RAM board. Thankfully, Maingear's Shuttle SB65G FB65 motherboard with 800MHz frontside-bus capability allowed me to upgrade the original Pentium 4 2.8GHz processor to a P4 Prescott 3.4GHz CPU. Since the Shuttle's XPC casing offers an extremely limited cooling space, I upgraded the Northbridge heat sink with one made by Zalman. I also swapped both PC3200 256MB RAM sticks with two 1GB sticks of PC3200 40MHz from Kingston for dual-channel memory

X-CUBE UPGRADES

	COMPONENT	PRICE
Cooling	Zalman ZM-NB32J Northbridge heat sink	$8
Power supply	Ahanix SilenX 300-watt Micro ATX power supply	$45
Processor (CPU)	Pentium 4 Prescott 3.4GHz Socket 478 processor	$310
Memory	Kingston 1GB PC3200 400MHz RAM modules	$266 x2
Hard drive	Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 200GB SATA HDD	$135
Graphics processor	ATI Radeon X800 PRO 256MB DDR RAM VPU	$429
Monitor	Philips Brilliance 190S5FB 19-inch LCD monitor	$430
Keyboard	Zboard keyboard	$50
Mouse	Razer Diamondback optical mouse	$50
Speakers	Zalman Theater 6 Headphones	$49
TOTAL COST		$2,038

Choosing the wrong components can make for a bad outcome.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK ROSS

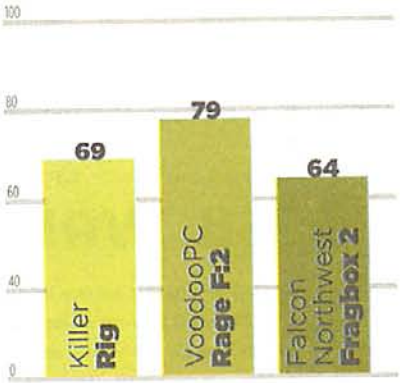


performance, and I ditched the Seagate Barracuda 80GB SATA HDD for Seagate's 200GB SATA variety. Finally, in order to make it LAN ready, I replaced the old CRT monitor with Philips' Brilliance 19-inch LCD for portability, and then swapped the Microsoft optical mouse and keyboard with a delicious Razer Diamondback optical mouse and Logitech MX wireless keyboard.

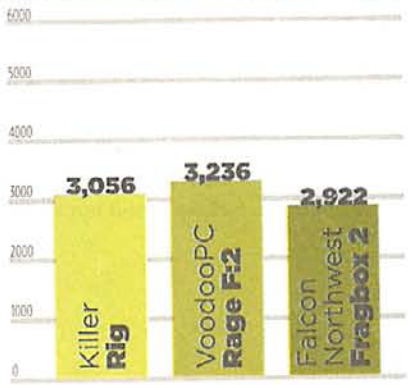
Before benchmarking the upgraded X-Cube, I made sure not to overclock the CPU, as it already runs at a hot 50 C-plus temp-erature with the new components (48 C before upgrade). *Halo* scores leapt from 38fps to 67fps at 1280x1074 using 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic settings. *UT2K4* also jumped about 25 frames to 79fps. This LAN beast is ready to rejoin the party.

Raphael Liberatore

3DGame Gauge "Lite 10



3DMark05



ALL TESTS RUN WITH 4X AA (ANTIALIASING) AND 8X AF (ANISOTROPIC FILTERING) TURNED ON UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.



A-List

The latest and greatest gadgets you gotta get

URL: www.fossil.com PRICE: $200

FOSSIL WRIST PDA

The idea is great: All the information on your PDA, but strapped to your wrist. Using Palm OS and 8MB of internal memory, this relatively unassuming watch can stash all your contact info. Geek gear this hardcore usually comes with a sign saying, "PLEASE KICK MY ASS!" Fortunately, it isn't as obtrusive as Fossil's other recent tech-watch effort (the data network Wrist.Net watches that feel as though you're tethering a radioactive weight to your arm), and the built-in watch program lets you change the watch's face every day of the week. Bet you can't do that with your timepiece.

We came up with only one downside: Between watch recharges—you need to plug it in every three to four days—our watch had a "fatal exception error." That's right, our watch crashed...but we're still not ready to go back to a wind-up.





URL: www.seagate.com PRICE: $170

SEAGATE POCKET HARD DRIVE

USB flash drives are handy, but they haven't been big enough—until now. With 5GB just waiting to be filled, your ass is now officially covered with the beefiest USB drive yet.

It may be about the size of a hockey puck and made rugged to absorb some shock, but this portable hard drive isn't meant for roughhousing, as if you're gonna try to beat the hell out of your data, anyway. An ice-blue light blinks when the drive is active on your PC or Mac, and being a USB 2.0 device, drive access is quick. At first we were stumped about what we were gonna do with all this space at our disposal. After stashing every important document and basic file you'd need to install on a fresh machine, there were still well over 3.5GB left to fill—plenty of room for videos, MP3s, and save-game files. For anyone jockeying between computers, this is the ultimate backup.

TECH REWIND

18 months of Tech scores at your fingertips

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Abit ICT-G MAX 3	09/03	★★★½☆
ABS Mayhem G1	05/04	★★★½☆
ABS Ultimate M5	09/03	★★★★☆
ABS Ultimate M6	07/04	★★★★☆
ABS Ultimate M8	06/03	★★★½☆
Actiontec 54Mbps Wireless Cable/DSL Router	11/04	★★★★½
Alienware Aurora	01/04	★★★★½
Altec Lansing MX5021	07/04	★★★½☆
Antec Lanboy case	06/03	★★★★☆
Antec Sonata PC Chassis	06/03	★★★★½
Apple 23-inch Cinema HD Display	01/05	★★★★½
Asus Extreme AX800 XT 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express	01/05	★★★★★
Asus Radeon 9800 XT	04/04	★★★★½
Asus V9980 Ultra graphics card	05/04	★★★★☆
Asus V9999 Gamers Edition Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU	01/05	★★★★½
ATI 9600 XT	05/04	★★★★☆
ATI All-in-Wonder 9800	10/03	★★★★☆
ATI Radeon 9800 Pro	06/03	★★★★½
ATI Radeon X800 XT and XT Pro	08/04	★★★★½
ATI Radeon X800 XT PCI Express 256MB GDDR3	01/05	★★★★½
Ati X600 XT	10/04	★★★½☆
BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU	01/05	★★★★½
Bose Companion 3	07/04	★★½☆☆
Boxx Technologies GameBOXX	07/04	★★★½☆
Creative Labs Decoder DDTS-100	04/04	★★★★☆
Creative Labs Giga Works S750	04/04	★★★★½
Creative Labs MegaWorks THX 6.1 650	07/03	★★★★½
Cyberpower Gamer Ultra 9900 Pro	06/04	★★★★☆
Cyberpower Infinity 9900 Extreme	04/04	★★★★☆



BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Cyberpower Infinity 9900 Extreme	02/05	★★★★☆
Dell Dimension 8300	06/04	★★★★☆
Dell Generation 3 Dimension XPS	10/04	★★★★☆
Dell Inspiron XPS	09/04	★★★★½
Dell W20040 LCD TV	09/04	★★★★½
DFI LANParty 875Pro	09/03	★★★★☆
EMachine M6807	05/04	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest FragBox	10/03	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest FragBox 2	11/04	★★★★½
Falcon Northwest FragBox Pro	05/04	★★★★½
Falcon Northwest Mach V	06/04	★★★★½
Gateway 200 ARC	09/04	★★★★☆
Gateway 700XL	08/03	★★★★½
Gateway 710G Gamer	06/04	★★★★½
Gateway 710XL	01/04	★★★★☆
Gateway FMC 901X	05/04	★★★★★
Gateway M675	02/04	★★★★½
Gigabyte N68T256DH Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3	01/05	★★★★☆
Hercules Prophetview 920 Pro DVI	03/04	★★★★½
Hypersonic Aviator AX6	05/04	★★½☆☆
Hypersonic Cyclone	01/04	★★★★☆
Hypersonic Cyclone XE	02/05	★★★★☆
IBuypower Back to School Machine	09/04	★★★½☆
IBuypower Gamer Extreme	03/04	★★★★☆
IBuypower Titanium	02/05	★★★★☆
IBuypower Titanium-XP	10/03	★★★★☆
IBuypower Zillion Pro PC	08/03	★★★★½
IBuypower Zillion-FX	06/04	★★★½☆
Ideazon Zboard keyboard	12/04	★★★½☆
Intel D925XCV	10/04	★★★★☆
Logitech MX510 Performance Optical Mouse	07/04	★★★★½



Gigabyte N68T256DH Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Logitech X620 6.1 Speakers	02/04	★★★★☆
Logitech Z-2200	04/04	★★★★½
Logitech Z-3	04/04	★★★★☆
Logitech Z-5300	02/04	★★★★½
Logitech Z-5500	12/04	★★★★½
Maingear Type 3 —VJ Edition	02/05	★★★★½
Nvidia 128MB GeForce 6600 GT PCI	12/04	★★★★½
Nvidia 2004 MB GeForce FX 5900 Ultra	09/03	★★★★☆
Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra	08/04	★★★★½
Nyko PC Air Flo EX	12/04	★★★★☆
PCFX Leviathan III	11/03	★★★★☆
Philips Acoustic Fusion 610	11/03	★★½☆☆
Philips Brilliance 230W5VS 23-inch LCD	01/05	★★★★½
Sennheiser PC-150 Headphones	12/03	★★★½☆
Tapwave Zodiac	02/04	★★★★☆
Toshiba Gosmio E15-AV101	12/04	★★★½☆
Toshiba Satellite 5205-S705	09/03	★★★★☆
Toshiba Satellite P25-S670	09/04	★★★★½
Totally Awesome Computers Ridiculously Insane PC	01/04	★★★★☆
Velocity Micro Gamers Edge	01/04	★★★★☆
Velocity Micro Gamers Edge 64	02/05	★★★★½
Velocity Micro Vision 64	10/04	★★★½☆
Vicious Commando	02/05	★★★★½
Vicious PC MSI MEGA 865	08/04	★★★★½
Vicious PC Ninja	06/04	★★★★½
Voodoo Hexx c:355	06/04	★★★★½
Voodoo Rage SLI	02/04	★★★★★
VoodooPC Envy M:860	11/04	★★★★½
VoodooPC F1	01/04	★★★★½
VoodooPC F50	10/04	★★★★½
VoodooPC Voodoo Doll	02/04	★★★★½
XFX Force Nvidia GeForce6600 GT 128MB DDR3 PCI Express	01/05	★★★★☆



Velocity Micro Gamers Edge 64

Fast Forward

Welcome to Fast Forward, *CGW*'s monthly back-of-the-book hodgepodge of all things PC-gaming related. Every month, we'll offer up a handy reviews index, a few editors' picks, and whatever else we manage to think o

GAMER'S EDGE: KOHAN II

Those sweethearts at TimeGate want you to succeed. How do we know? They kindly provided us with the following *Kohan II* strategy guide. Yep—tips straight from the developer. We'll thank them for you.



EARLY GAME: RAISING YOUR KINGDOM

The first 10 minutes of a skirmish game in *Kohan II: Kings of War* are very important. The following tips assume that you're playing on an unexplored random map, but most are still useful if you're playing on a preexplored map.

SCOUT, SETTLE, AND SCOUT SOME MORE

When the map begins, recruit at least one scouting company as soon as you can. Obtaining some scouts usually takes precedence over building expensive structures like markets. Remember that faster units and units with trailblazing or recon make good early scouts. Cavalry are great for early scouting, but settlers are surprisingly cost-effective scouts as well. You can kill two birds with one stone by using your settlers to scout camps for slower units.

Even once you've obtained your second settlement, don't stop scouting. Keep scouting aggressively and consider recruiting more scouting units to keep up the pressure. During the first 10 minutes, you are going to want to explore as much of the map as possible.



With the drauga, two raider companies and one settler company make a perfect early force. This army is fast, easy to support, and can tackle most lairs

LAIRS FIRST, UPGRADES SECOND

Lairs provide a gold reward when destroyed, and this reward money can play a big part in your kingdom's early economy if budgeted well. By recruiting a couple extra early companies to scout and find lairs, you can earn back your initial investment and deprive your opponent of lucrative rewards. Hitting a lot of early lairs also earns you extra experience for your Kohan heroes. By skipping a settlement or structure upgrade, you can often afford to recruit an extra company that can earn back its initial cost after clearing only one or two lairs.



Here, two raider companies team up to hit a rhaksha hive. The gold reward from this lair alone will pay for one of the raider companies.

KNOWING WHEN NOT TO SETTLE

Before you decide to settle on a spot, keep in mind how close it is to the enemy. It is often not worth settling if it's on a spot right next door to the enemy. Scouting pays off big here, because the more you know about the map, the more likely you are to know where your enemy is situated. This, in turn, lets you know which settlement spots are safe to settle and which ones will be defensive nightmares. Even though it is tempting to settle on every spot or settle on the closest spot, keep in mind how easy that spot will be to defend before you settle.

MIDDLE GAME: TACTICS TURN THE TIDE

Once you've mastered the first 10 minutes, it's time to start improving your tactics. Assuming you can stay on roughly equal military footing with your enemy,

it will be superior tactics that decide the victor.

COMBINED ARMS

As you move into midgame, your number of military options expands, and you must make some hard recruitment choices. If the distance between settlements is small, infantry will shine. If the distance is far, you'll need more cavalry. You can toss in some support units, siege units, and archers to improve your firepower. For example, a company of swordsmen supported by clerics is good, but it is too expensive to put clerics in every company until very late in the game. Backing a supported company with several unsupported companies will help you maximize the cost-effectiveness of your army. Use your tough, expensive companies to lead the charge while using cheaper companies to flank, raid, and entrench to defend settlements. Just one company of unsupported light cavalry can make an excellent flanker for a primarily infantry army.



Here we have two swordsmen companies with one cleric supporting each. Backing the swordsmen are some engineers and one plain lancer company. Use the swordsmen as your main attack force while the lancers and engineers scout, flank, and defend.

ENTRAP AND ENCIRCLE

If you have managed to stay on relatively equal military footing with your opponents, you're going to have a hard time capturing a settlement. In this situation, it can often help to lure your opponent into attacking while you prepare a devastating counterattack. If you know where your opponent is going to strike, which is often your closest settlement to him, be prepared to let him attack.

Do not position your army inside the settlement; position it outside and out of your opponent's view. When his military comes marching, let him crash the settlement walls. Try to encircle him so the fastest route back to his settlement is blocked by your army. Once the walls go down, charge him with every company you have. If he runs, pick slow or wounded companies and destroy them. If he fights, his army will be split fighting your militia and your incoming defenders. In either case, you will gain a temporary edge and possibly enough momentum to turn around and immediately capture one of his settlements.

TANKING FOR THE WIN

In a pitched match, it takes only one or two extra companies to turn the tide. When this situation arises, you want to be the one with the extra companies. To achieve this, sometimes you need to "tank" your economy, whereby you sell off your resource-producing structures for additional gold. Use it to recruit companies, which you will need to immediately send into the battle. It is not unusual to have a very poor economy when tanking, it is even OK to have a negative economy if you have enough surplus cash to last at least five minutes. Exports, markets, and barracks are prime targets to sell, so keep in mind your tank potential as the battle progresses. The sudden arrival of one to three extra companies can win the day, so be prepared to make the sacrifice for a big offensive push or emergency defense.



In this city, sell off the barracks and market and disband the pioneers for a sudden boost in gold.

Rewind 100

What should you play today? Names in red indicate Editors' Choice games

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Alida	Holiday 04	★½☆☆☆
Alpha Black Zero: Intrepid Protocol	12/04	★★☆☆☆
Scrapland	Holiday04	★★★★☆
Arena Wars	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
Aura: Fate of the Ages	10/04	★★★☆☆
Axis & Allies	01/05	★★½☆☆
Besieger	09/04	★★☆☆☆
Beyond Divinity	08/04	★★★½☆



Blitzkrieg: Rolling Thunder	02/05	★★★½☆
Call of Duty: United Offensive	12/04	★★★★½
Campaigns on the Danube	12/04	★★★½☆
Catwoman	11/04	★½☆☆☆
Chaos Legion	08/04	★½☆☆☆
Chris Sawyer's Locomotion	Holiday 04	★½☆☆☆



City of Heroes	08/04	★★★★½
Codename: Panzers	11/04	★★★½☆
Conflict: Vietnam	01/05	★★½☆☆

Rewind100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Crusader Kings	08/04	★★★½☆
Crystal Key 2	08/04	★★½☆☆
CSI: Crime Scene Invest.	08/04	★½☆☆☆
Dark Fall II: Lights Out	Holiday 04	★★★★½
D-Day	01/05	★★½☆☆
Dead Man's Hand	08/04	★★½☆☆
Decisive Battles of World War II: Battles in Normandy	01/05	★★★★½



Doom 3	10/04	★★★★★
EverQuest II	02/05	★★★★½
Evil Genius	12/04	★★★½☆
FIFA Soccer 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★½
Full Spectrum Warrior	Holiday 04	★★★½☆
Galactic Civilizations: Altarian Prophecy	12/04	★★★½☆
Ground Control II: Operation Exodus	10/04	★★★★☆
Half-Life 2	02/05	★★★★½
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	11/04	★★★½☆
Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile	01/05	★★★½☆
Joint Operations: Escalation	02/05	★★★★☆
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	09/04	★★★★½
Kuma\War	09/04	★½☆☆☆



Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude	Holiday 04	★★½☆☆
Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle	08/04	★★½☆☆
Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth	02/05	★★★★☆

LATE GAME: PLANNING FOR THE EPIC

Inevitably, you'll go up against an opponent who can't be beaten without a prolonged fight. When this situation arises, understand that there are special late-game strategies that will come into play.



CAPITALIZING ON TECHNOLOGIES

The importance of technologies grows considerably as the game passes the 30-minute mark. Researching technologies, instead of recruiting additional companies, helps keep your army manageable and allows you to further improve your elite or veteran companies. Technologies also become increasingly attractive as you fill up your structure slots; if you need a stronger front line but don't have room for another blacksmith, consider researching a tech to boost your frontline units instead. It's easy to fall into the trap of constantly recruiting more companies, but don't forget that the larger your army gets, the more practical it is to research techs instead. Once you've got 12-plus companies, you should strongly consider researching technologies instead of recruiting new companies.

THE WISDOM IN RAZING SETTLEMENTS

An opponent who's on roughly equal terms with you won't let you take a settlement without a fight. Even if you do manage to take the settlement, there's a good chance he will bring in reserves to evict you, or in a team game, a teammate may come to help him retake the settlement. In a situation like this, razing the settlement is often a wise and decisive move. Deploy your troops on the perimeter of the settlement and have them engage any enemy troops that come nearby. Even if your damaged forces can't win, you need to buy time for the workers to raze the settlement. If you deploy your troops wisely, you should be able to cut off any enemy counterattack. You may not be able to capture the settlement, but you can still deny your opponent the use of it.

SIEGE UNITS AND RAIDING

Siege units capture settlements very quickly. This ability allows them to break into enemy territory and capture otherwise "safe" settlements. A few strong frontline companies, possibly just a single veteran or elite one, mixed with a few siege units can crack a town in record time. If your opponent isn't prepared, you may be able to raze the settlement or hold it long enough to divert him from the real front. This does require you to divert some of your forces, so plan a careful defense while the raid is underway. Entrench your main army at a good spot and be prepared to hold it if your opponent launches a full counterattack. To prevent yourself from being a victim of this tactic, keep a few fast companies around that can respond to attacks behind the main front. If you don't have the companies to respond to the attack, launch a full-out counterattack against your opponent's most valuable settlement. While he may still capture your settlement, you may be able to capture an even more valuable settlement from him.



THE chronicles OF EGGBERT

One gnome's journey through *World of WarCraft*

BY JEFF GREEN

Sometimes you play to level up. Sometimes you want to solve quests. And sometimes you just kind of feel like being an idiot. For a lot of my time in *World of WarCraft* this month, I was that idiot.

Having discovered the /train command last month, I continue to derive an unhealthy amount of pleasure from it, especially for a supposedly grown man. I also found that it's even more fun to do when half-naked in a crowd of people (um, in the game). I may not have received any XP or loot for such in-game behavior, but it nevertheless made this vale of tears here on Earth a tad more palatable this month for your humble chronicler.



Woo-woo! All aboard the gnome train! Eggbert gets down in the Ironforge Auction House.

HOURS 40-60

When not busy being a public nuisance, I managed to climb up to level 21, mostly by soloing quests in Westfall and Lakeshire, the latter being my first experience in one of the game's "contested territories," where the threat of getting "ganked" by other players looms large. At one point, I was killed so many times in a row that I finally coughed up the silver to purchase the Unending Breath spell, which lets me breathe underwater for 10 minutes (and is also, oddly, a counterspell to my real-life salami breath). So, like a true hero, when the alarm would go up that a horde invasion was coming, I would dive into the water and hide there until the threat had passed, letting my fellow alliance players get killed instead of me. Yay!

Speaking of water sports, I discovered that one of the Lakeshire quests calls for high-level fishing, so I took a long break in combat and leveling to go fishing all around the "lowbie" game areas. In addition to catching 10,000 fish, I also managed to snag an excellent pair of boots, a two-handed staff, and some shoulder pads, none of which were waterlogged...but also none of which I could actually use. So I sold them all and made a nice chunk of change instead. Killing and shopping, folks. That's what it's all about.



I'm happy because I have my fancy flying tiger goggles. I made 'em myself!



Gnomes like us, baby we were born to fish.



Mini Diablo and Kraknagma (my voidwalker) chill out while I do some fishing.

Rewind100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Madden NFL 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★½
Manchester United Soccer	02/05	★★½☆☆



Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault	01/05	★★★★½
Men of Honor	01/05	★★★★☆
Missing: Since January	10/04	★★★★☆
Myst IV: Revelation	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
NHL 2005	01/05	★★½☆☆
Pacific Fighters	01/04	★★★½☆
Painkiller: Battle Out of Hell	02/05	★★★½☆
Perimeter	09/04	★★½☆☆
Pitfall: The Lost Expedition	01/05	★☆☆☆☆
Port Royale 2	12/04	★★★½☆
RollerCoaster Tycoon 3	02/05	★★★★☆
Rome: Total War	Holiday 04	★★★★½
The Saga of Ryzom	01/05	★★★☆☆
Secret of the Silver Earring	01/05	★★★★☆
Shadow Ops: Red Mercury	Holiday 04	★★½☆☆
ShellShock: Nam '67	09/04	★½☆☆☆
Shrek 2	09/04	★★★½☆



Sid Meier's Pirates!	02/05	★★★★☆
Silent Hill 4: The Room	01/05	★★½☆☆
The Sims 2	11/04	★★★★★
Singles: Flirt Up Your Life	09/04	★☆☆☆☆
Soldiers: Heroes of WWII	11/04	★★★★☆
Soldner: Secret Wars	10/04	★½☆☆☆
Space Interceptor: Project Freedom	02/05	★★★☆☆

Rewind 100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Spider-Man 2	11/04	★½☆☆☆



The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie	02/05	★★½☆☆
Star Wars Battlefront	Holiday 04	★★★½☆
Star Wars Galaxies: Jump to Lightspeed	02/05	★★★½☆
SuperPower 2	02/05	★½☆☆☆
The Suffering	10/04	★★★½☆
Thief: Deadly Shadows	09/04	★★½☆☆
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★½
TrackMania	10/04	★★½☆☆
Tribes: Vengeance	Holiday 04	★★★½☆
True Crime: Streets of L.A.	09/04	★★☆☆☆
Universal Combat	10/04	★★☆☆☆
Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines	02/05	★★★★☆
Virtual Skipper 3	10/04	★★★½☆
Wanted: A Wild Adventure	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
War in the Pacific	11/04	★★★½☆
War Over Vietnam	Holiday 04	★★½☆☆
War Times	08/04	★★☆☆☆
Wings over Vietnam	02/05	★★★½☆



World of WarCraft	02/05	★★★★½
World Soccer Winning Eleven 7 International	10/04	★★★★½
Zoo Tycoon 2	02/05	★★½☆☆

HIGH SCORE

What do we like at 1UP.com? Wouldn't you like to know...

Man, it's pretty cool to have something like 1UP.com at our constant disposal. I mean, since we spend most of our time spouting off about one thing or another, it's awfully nice to have a place that's devoted, essentially, to spouting off. Makes us feel a little like we belong to something. You, too, can have this feeling at http://cgwfans-club.1UP.com. Try it—you'll like it.

FEATURED BLOG



Che Chou
http://chespace.1UP.com/

Che Chou, *XBN*'s erstwhile executive editor, has some pretty deep thoughts on everything from unemployment to import games. *XBN*, we hardly knew you!

CLUB OF THE MONTH

GMR Fan Club
http://gmrfanclub-club.1UP.com/

This month also marks the end of an extremely successful two-year run for our sister publication *GMR*. This one's for you, guys—we'll miss ya!



STUPID PICTURE OF THE MONTH

WE THINK THIS PICTURE REALLY DOES SPEAK FOR ITSELF.





WHAT'S UP WITH 1UP?

A few words from 1UP.com's editor-in-chief

I'd like to highlight a 1UP club I recently started called the Link of the Day Club (http://linkoftheday-club.1UP.com). You know those hilarious e-mails that get forwarded around school or the office each day? They make the day that much more tolerable—so I decided to create a space for people to pool all of their favorites. I suppose I'm just endlessly entertained by the random links that seem to grab the spotlight: the crazy eBay auctions, the amusing *Flash* animations, wardrobe malfunctions, or singers getting exposed for lip-synching on *SNL*. I created this club with the intent of sharing some of the amusing stuff that gets sent around our office (you should see the stuff the *CGW* folks find...), and in turn I get to see what sort of stuff other folks have happened upon. It's a success so far, with people supplying killer new links each day.

Another similar club that I can't take credit for but must mention is the Useless Video Game Facts Club (http://uvgf-club.1UP.com). Did you know Nintendo was originally a playing-card company? You could become the world's greatest gaming trivia dork overnight with this club.

What I really dig about these clubs is the concept of everyone pitching in for a greater purpose. Even if the greater purpose is just to create more avenues to waste time!

Sam Kennedy http://capnsmak.1UP.com/

SCREEN OF THE MONTH

Hey, kids! Fancy yourself a great artiste? Send in your best screenshot from any game you're currently playing, and the best one we receive each month will be printed right here, along with the winner's name. As an example, Blizzard has graciously let us reprint a recent winner of its own Screenshot of the Month contest, which shows players in *World of WarCraft* acting out a scene from the movie *Fight Club*...with gnomes. (Congrats to Gninja of the Garden Gnomes *WOW* guild for the shot.) Send your entry to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject "Screenshot of the Month." Good luck!



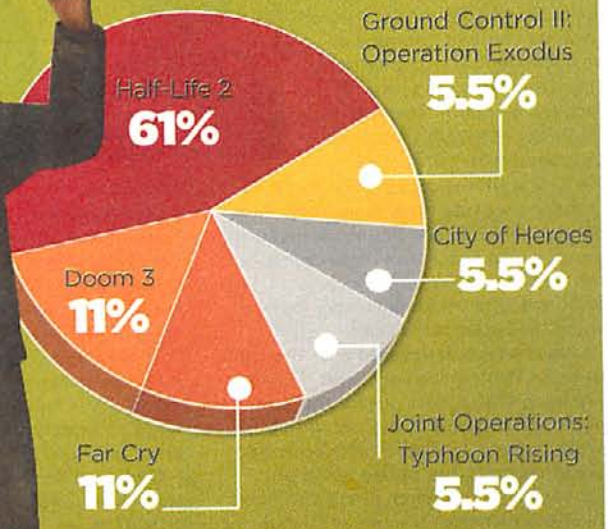
The first rule of Gnome Club: Don't talk about Gnome Club....

POLL OF THE MONTH

Hit up our forums at http://boards.1UP.com and vote in our monthly poll.

READERS' VOTE: 2004 GAMES OF THE YEAR





DESERT ISLAND GAMES

You're stranded on a desert island with only five PC games...which ones? E-mail us at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject "Desert Island Games" (along with your name and city/state) and give us your picks!



Tribes: Vengeance
So I can dream about skiing along the ocean all the way home...and then rubber-banding every time I get close to a flag.



Arcanum: Of Steamworks & Magick Obscura
No matter how many times you play all gajillion hours of *Arcanum*, there's always a completely different way to do the whole game over again.

Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory
There are no anti-Nazi laws on uncharted islands, though the anti-spawn-flaring ones still abide...oh well.





City of Heroes
I have to get to level 50 before *Issue 3* comes out. (Oops, too late.)

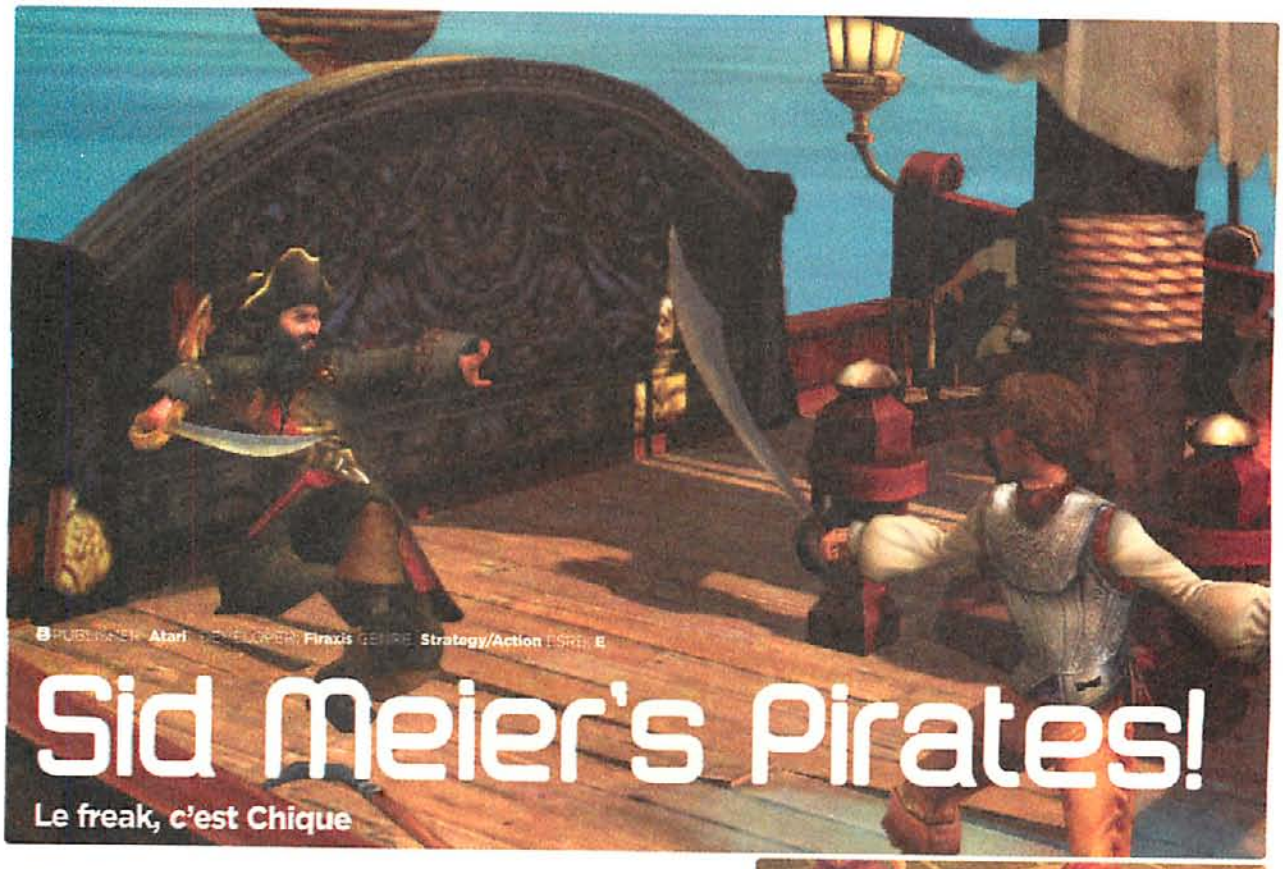


Doom 3
Just because I haven't finished it yet...stupid spiders.

Mike Ryan
New Port Richey, FL

Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins



PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Firaxis GENRE: Strategy/Action ESRB: E

Sid Meier's Pirates!

Le freak, c'est Chique

Bruce: Tom's idea is to play *Sid Meier's Pirates!* like some sort of historical monograph, starting our careers in 1660 at Swashbuckler level and then comparing our fame scores once we retire. The only thing that I noticed was that for some reason, Tom has chosen to represent France. According to the strictly impartial rules set up by the International War Crimes Tribunal, this means I automatically win.

Chique's First Voyage: The French pirate Chique was renowned for the wit and charm that made him a hit with the daughters of the Caribbean's governors. He sets out from Port-de-Paix in a barque called *The Pissed Civet*, selling luxury goods to French settlements. But on February 22, 1660, his reign of terror begins with an attack on *La Mermaid*, a Spanish sloop carrying gold through the Windward Passage between Cuba and Hispaniola. Next, Chique attacks the English sloop *Adventure*, taking on board her cook (Chique's failing health at a young age would later be attributed to the years at sea spent eating English cuisine). The *Adventure*, equipped with cotton sails and fine-grain gunpowder, is dubbed *The Pissed Civet II* and becomes Chique's flagship.

Bruce: You read all that, right? Good for you. That means you're taking your investment in this magazine seriously and getting the most out of every paragraph you paid for, no matter how ridiculous. I'm going to be honest and say I never really got past the part where Tom renamed himself Chique. That sounds like the name of some French peacekeeper. Since we're not playing the Abandon Rwanda scenario, I'm not sure why Tom feels it's so important to try and keep the peace. In fact, the computer seems to be a lot better at keeping the peace than the soldiers of that ex-NATO Surrender Factory, since about 15 minutes after I start the game, some inexplicable series of role-playing events makes me end up in prison. Not a real prison, but the even-worse in-game kind, where I have to sit and listen to Tom's nursery rhymes about his Good Ship Lollipop.



Chique's fancy footwork impresses the ladies from Nassau to Barbados...

Chique's Second Voyage: With the triple hammocks of *The Pissed Civet II* filled to capacity, Chique sets out for the Straits of Florida on April 15, 1661, stopping along the way to dig up 5,000 pieces of gold that had been buried north of Santiago by the French pirate L'Ollonais. Over the course of his career, Chique will make a habit of digging up money left lying around by other pirates.

Six months later, having seized a Spanish trade galleon loaded with goods, Chique is pursued into the straits by a pirate hunter out of Havana. Slowed by the captured galleon, he barely escapes by to the French town of Florida Keys. Chique returns to Tortuga, but on the way, his impatient crew mutinies, stealing the trade galleon and her cargo. In the following months, Chique takes on board a navigator and a surgeon and buys a puffy shirt.

Chique's Third Voyage: Chique's ill-fated third voyage begins May 1, 1663, and consists of things such as trying unsuccessfully to attack two brigs at once, sailing



Tom
Last month:
Tom won one (for Frodo!) in the *Battle for Middle-Earth* against the evil Erik Wolpaw.



Bruce
Last month:
Bruce refused to play because games with hobbits make him feel all icky inside.

around without enough money for repairs, and then doing a stint in the Santa Domingo prison. In fact, he'd rather not talk about it if you don't mind.

Chique's Fourth Voyage: In 1664, Chique sets out for the Yucatán to dig up more unattended treasure. On April 9, 1665, after having pocketed 6,000 gold that formerly belong to Stede Bonnet, he encounters Mr. Bonnet, who seems unhappy at having his gold unearthed. Chique grapes and chains Bonnet severely and forces him to surrender his battered ship and another 6,500 gold. But the wheel of fortune turns when Chique is driven off his own ship and forced to take a long, upwind journey in Bonnet's battered brigantine. After two months, the food runs out. On August 8, Chique finally brings the damaged brigantine, now dubbed *The Pissed Civet III*, into Florida Keys. Weak from the long days of deprivation, he still manages to so impress the governor's daughter with his fancy dancing that she gives him a leather vest to complement his puffy shirt.

What follows is a series of successful attacks in the Straits of Florida and the Bahamas that earns him such favor with the English and the French that he's appointed a captain and baron, respectively.

Bruce: Either they don't do a lot of dancing in prison, or the kind of dancing they do isn't simulated by this game. Unfortunately for me, I got a firsthand look at this game-design disaster when I practiced on one of the lower levels. I watched two separate dancing cut-scenes, wondering why my guy was stumbling around like an idiot and if I needed to level up his dexterity and charisma. Turns out they weren't cut-scenes—I was actually supposed to *use the arrow keys to make my pirate guy dance around*. I put emphasis on that last part in case you are clinically insane and didn't notice the problem yourself.

Chique's Fifth Voyage: On June 1, 1667, Chique leaves Florida Keys to dig up treasure on the northern end of Cuba. On the way he discovers L'Ollonais attacking a French ship. Recalling that L'Ollonais had called him "dog poo" when he visited the traitorous pirate's haven, Chique intercedes. *The Pissed Civet III* outguns and outmans the brigantine *Blood Debt*. After a careful battle in which Chique loses only 12 men, L'Ollonais surrenders at the point of a cutlass. Using the pilfered pirate gold, Chique sails around in his pair of tricked-out brigantines, buying jewelry for governors' daughters, who then join him in courtly dancing. The adoring lasses present him with gifts such as a metal cuirass, a set of balanced swords, and a brace of pistols.

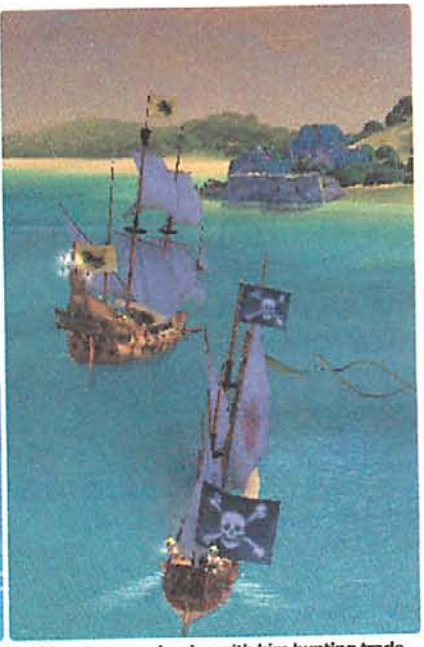
Bruce: Have you been getting the feeling that instead of describing the game, Tom is really fantasizing about himself in the third person, Bob Dole style? Who uses the word "intercedes"? Next he'll be calling himself an "interlocutor" when he talks to "the lasses." I'm almost considering buying up the entire print run of this *CGW* and tossing it off the Godwin-Austen Glacier, because I am seriously getting the creeps.



The ladies love Chique, but he has trouble "sealing the deal" thanks to jealous fiances.



Chique's fleet cruises the Caribbean, bringing fancy jewelry to governors' daughters.



Chique's career begins with him hunting trade galleons with a barque, *The Pissed Civet*, and then a sloop, *The Pissed Civet II*.

Chique's Fifth Voyage, continued: Chique defeats the pirate Blackbeard in the Bahamas in 1668 and takes his frigate, renaming it *The Pissed Civet IV*. In Nassau, he gets a silk shirt and a spyglass and is promoted to an English colonel. In Florida Keys, he gets a fine telescope and is promoted to a French count. He returns to Hispaniola and uses his new frigate to attack Spanish trade galleons, loading their cargo onto his brigantines. The ladies love him, and he continues to shower them with jewelry.

In the summer of 1668, the Spanish capture Leogane, and Chique's crew of 325 men drive them out and restore the French governor. Chique is appointed a marquis for his troubles. Buoyed by his success, he sets out in January of 1669 to take Santiago itself. But his crew will have none of it, and 40 men desert him when he sets out. Further discouraged by losing duels to three rivals for the affections of various governors' daughters (in spite of his fancy shirt, cuirass, swords, and pistols), Chique decides to disband.

Chique's Sixth Voyage: On November 22, 1669, Chique loses another duel with a rival fiancé in Tortuga. Bitterly disappointed at his inability to woo beautiful women, he resolves to instead hunt down the villains Raymondo and Montalban, who are cowering in cities along the Spanish Main. On the way, he visits the Lesser Antilles to try his luck with the English women. Even though he secures a three-stringed fiddle from a woman in Montserrat, Chique's crew grows impatient. Despite (or perhaps because of) Chique's rendition of various pirate tunes on the fiddle, the crew begins deserting.

Chique's Seventh Voyage: Chique sets sail for Curaçao in the summer of 1671, only to find out that the Dutch, who have a peace treaty with Spain, won't let him in. With no place to sell his plundered Spanish goods, he returns to the Lesser Antilles. In February of 1672, he sets out again, determined not to slow himself down with any Spanish booty. However, the crew is restless at the lack of booty action, and morale sags despite the fine English food and the three-stringed fiddling.

When he finally finds and defeats Raymondo in August, he uncovers only a useless shred of a map that reveals that his sister is held captive somewhere near a geyser. With a badly battered prize ship and no friendly port in sight to sell plundered goods, Chique decides to use his 190 men to capture Nombre de Dios and hand it over to France. From this new French port, he heads west to fight Montalban in Santa Catalina, only to be driven off his beloved frigate and rescued by a sloop in his fleet (now dubbed *The Pissed Civet V*).

From here, Chique sets out to follow a map to a lost Inca city that he got from some girl he danced with. On April 30, 1673, he rounds the northern tip of the Yucatán. But in a sudden turn of bad luck,



I know he looks like a fop, my daughter, but please marry him! He has lots of money and season tickets to the Oakland A's!

after taking a grain transport to stock up on food, a pirate hunter from Campeche sinks *The Pissed Civet V*, along with all of Chique's pirate goodies and over 11,000 in gold.

Bruce: civet (s_v'_t; -_t; 119) n. [F. *civette*, fr. It. *zibetto*, fr. Ar. *zabad*. Cf. zibet.] 1. A substance of the consistency of butter or honey, found in a pouch near the sexual organs of the true civet cats. It is of a clear yellowish or brownish color, of a strong, musky odor. It is used as a perfume.

Chique's Seventh Voyage, continued: A year later, Chique is rescued. Determined more than ever to find the lost Inca city, he sets ashore at various points along the Yucatán looking for two deserted cabins side by side. On October 6, 1674, he discovers the lost Inca city, which is fine and all but isn't nearly as impressive as the 50,000 pieces of gold the Incas left inside.

Returning to the familiar waters of the Antilles, Chique continues to lose two duels with jealous fiancés. He finally finds medicinal herbs in Antigua in 1675, but in a perhaps related incident, he tries to take a shortcut between the coast of Cuba and a sandbar at a landmark appropriately called Rum Point. What follows is four months of spinning his ship around trying to extricate it, only to emerge with his crew starved and demoralized by Chique's inability to not bump into Cuba. *The Pissed Civet VII*, a captured Spanish royal sloop, then falls prey to a pirate hunter, leaving Chique far upwind of Hispaniola in a battered trade galleon. It takes eight months to reach Petit Goave, where Chique is promptly rapiered by a jealous fiancé. Chique is 34 years old, in failing health, harangued by his mutinous crew, and now the captain of a trade galleon. A frickin' trade galleon. But he is also wildly rich with Inca gold that brings his share for this voyage to 24,111 pieces of gold.

Chique's Eighth Voyage: Chique sets out on July 12, 1677, in his trade galleon. He spends the next two years trying to get a better ship and is imprisoned three times before ending up with a crappy little sloop, which becomes *The Pissed Civet VIII*, and a crew that's really put out with him.

Chique's Ninth Voyage: Having won the heart—and beat the fiancé—of a rather plain girl in Tortuga, Chique sets out on May 27, 1680, to rescue her from the kidnapper Mendoza, who has carried her away to Gibraltar. However, on the way south, he is marooned for a year after losing a battle to Raymondo. Chique is rescued and then works his way along the Lesser Antilles down to the Spanish Main with a newly happy crew.

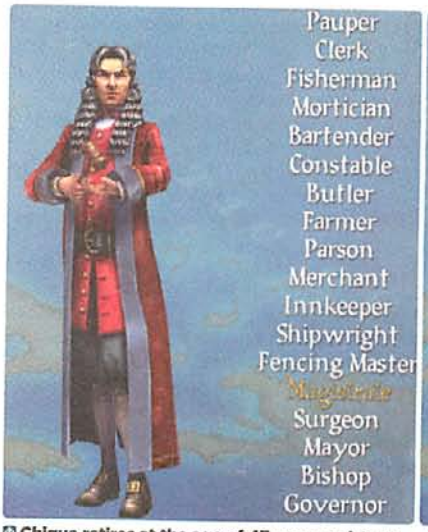
Bruce: I've been expecting that at some point Tom would drop the whole swashbuckling role-playing game schtick and admit this is really just another case of him getting excited over *Shadow Watch* or *Flying Heroes*. Instead, the whole thing keeps getting scarier. How does he know the crew members were happy? This is sounding a lot like *Pirates!* fan fiction. Or slash fiction. Whatever that is, because I actually have no idea.

Chique's Ninth Voyage, continued: Chique captures a sloop of war from Bart Roberts, which becomes *The Pissed Civet IX*, and resumes the quest to find Mendoza. On November 20, 1682, Chique finds and attacks Mendoza's war galleon and is driven overboard in a sword fight. He's rescued by his backup sloop, *The Pissed Civet X*. The next day, Chique carefully weaves off the galleon's bow, firing chain and grape until there are only 18 men aboard. He boards the galleon, rescues his fiancée, and heads north to return her to Tortuga.

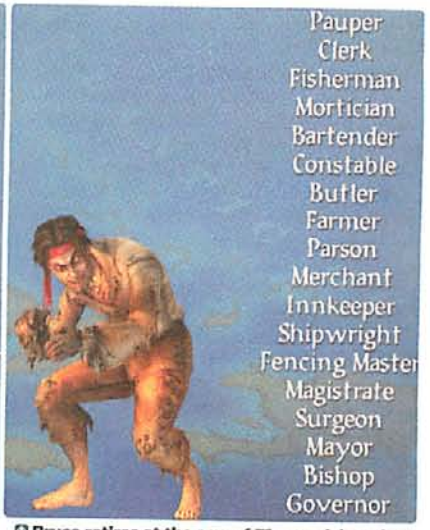
Bruce: Men-do-zaaaaaa! Sorry. Is this over yet?

Chique's Ninth Voyage, continued: Chique finally arrives in Tortuga April 3, 1684, and is married, even though she's "rather plain" (at age 42, Chique figures he'll take what he can get). He spends his waning years sinking Spanish ships, occasionally bringing jewelry to mistresses in the Lesser Antilles, and half-meaning to get back down to the Spanish Main to rescue his sister "one of these days." But he does no such thing and instead retires at the age of 43, taking on the profession of a magistrate in Tortuga with nearly 56,732 gold and 6,250 acres of land. His fame is 63.

Bruce: That was nice, wasn't it? Unfortunately for Tom, like I mentioned at the beginning, the precedent set by the ongoing Milosevic trial clearly states that if you choose France, you lose. So I thank him for the entertaining game and somewhat less entertaining commentary, but the only use I can really think of for it would be to fashion some of those pop-up cutouts of pirate ships and make the whole thing into a kids' book. Bottom line: Bruce 1, Tom 0. Thanks and good night.



Chique retires at the age of 43 as a magistrate in Tortuga with a fame of 63.



Bruce retires at the age of 31 as a pickpocket in San Juan with a fame of 0.



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Bio-Rhythm Nation 1814

No peace to know peace

It's not like I'm the sort of guy who lassos a coil of rusted razor wire around the throat of the self-important half-wit sitting behind me on the commuter train, slapping the back of my reclining head as I try to nap as he gestures to invisible cohorts while blabbering into the hands-free Bluetooth cell phone earpiece that makes him look like an extra-pasty Borg. I only *think* it. I only think about cinching that razor wire tight and whipping it through his Adam's apple until he's gargling his own blood to Mitzi in accounts payable and then his ego-swollen head hits the train floor and a great "Huzzah!" rings out from my grateful fellow commuters and we play lacrosse with his softening noggin in elated celebration until the train hits our stop and we saunter off, slicked with junior sales account executive blood and whistling a merry tune. There's a big difference.

Still, there are those who would make the argument that this implies I need to, in a word, chill.

OK, point taken. I've got a hectic work schedule, two unruly kids, and a wife who has left a butter knife welded to the kitchen counter with grape jelly every single morning for seven years. Maybe if I could just relax a bit, those projectile nosebleeds would lessen in frequency, if not trajectory. Maybe I could stop sweating urine and actually use a restroom like a normal guy. Maybe, just maybe, I could know inner peace. With this in mind, I loaded *The Journey to the Wild Divine* onto my computer. What a mistake.

Wild Divine seems to have been created for that huge market of nitwits still mourning the nonoccurrence of the Harmonic Convergence nearly two decades ago. It comes in a big *World of WarCraft Collector's Edition*-sized box, the better to hold the Mac and PC installation CDs, the *Wild Divine* manual, the companion guide, a CD full of that nerve-shredding wind chime and synthesizer noodling garbage desperate divorcées with bad perms seem to like—and a USB biofeedback device. This chunk of blue plastic, excuse me, this Light Stone Energy Translator attaches to three of your fingers courtesy of three snap-on sensors, excuse me, snap-on Magic Rings. Through the Light Stone, plus a few mouse clicks, you interact with the game world of *Wild Divine*.

And oh, what a world it is. Bad full-motion video of overly necklaced old ladies in bathrobes slapped onto a backdrop apparently drawn by a withdrawn, unicorn-fixated high school girl. It's an absolutely insane—and by insane I do not mean "intense and cool" but "crazy and disturbed"—mix of vaguely Eastern architecture, black felt gardenscapes, greeting card highlights circa 1978, and random gazebos.



ILLUSTRATION BY JON WAYSHAK

Are there cheat codes for personal bliss? Not on gamefaqs.com there aren't.

Granted, it didn't make the best first impression on me, but I was going to stay the course. If all that stood between me and the self-discovery promised courtesy of this game's Cosmic Yoga was the petrified forest of my own cynicism, then I was going to find my way out through that dark and stony wood to the salvation just beyond its frigid borders. So I stuck through the "energy juggling" and "breath of peace" drills of the tutorial and clicked my way through the garish world as the game proper commenced.

Every so often, a fat FMV dog sparkling with, I don't know, pixilated peace and serenity dust I guess, would waddle by as I crawled with pre-*Myst* excruciating slowness through the Sun Realm. Climbing a vine-choked staircase, I passed some sparkling llamas (which, incidentally, is the name of my new band—"Hello, Barstow, we're Sparkling Llamas and we're here to rock!") before reaching the summit where Mr. Miyagi challenged me to make some balloons float past a window by calming the hell down. And before you knew it, it was over.

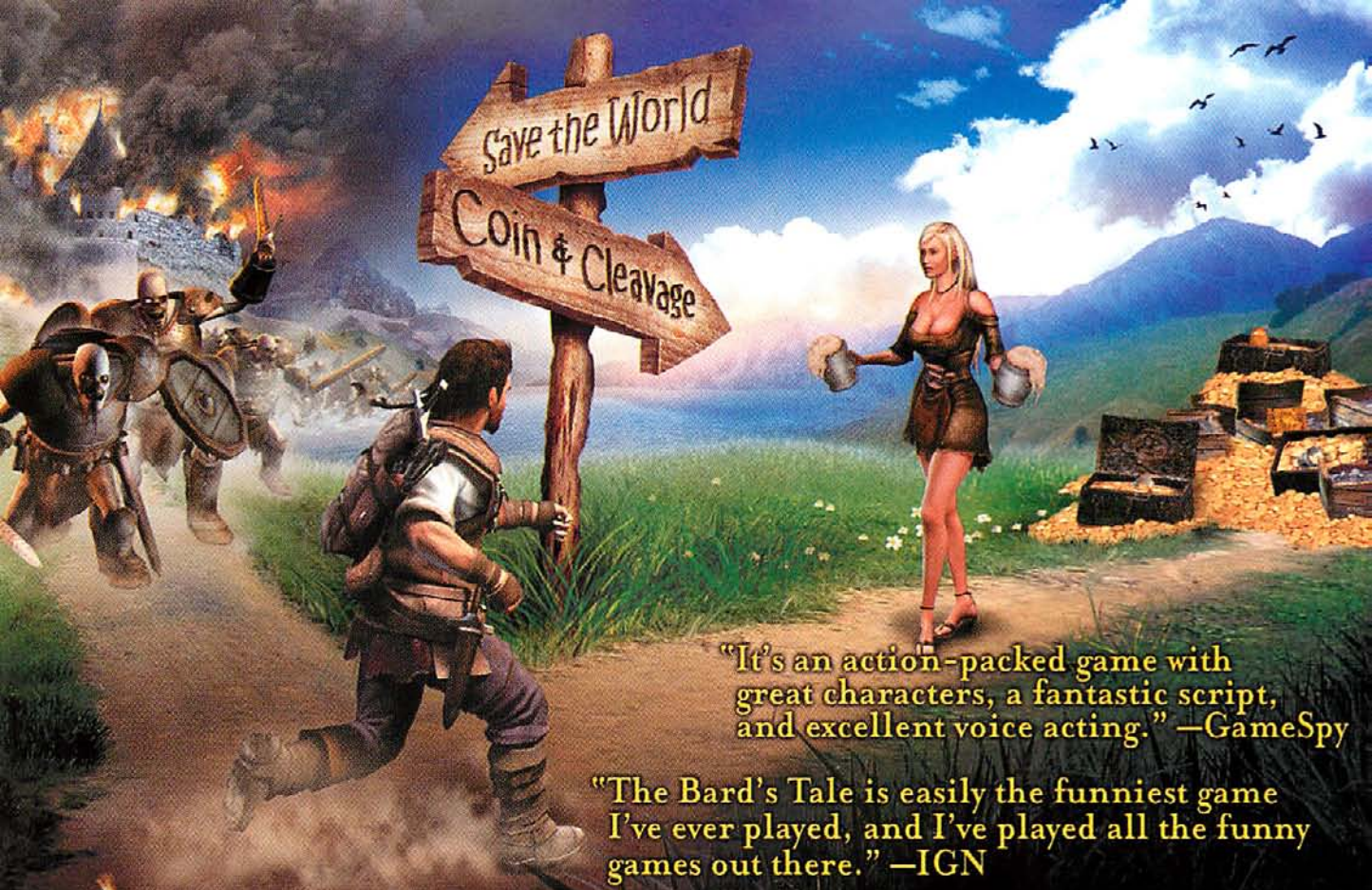
I stumbled into the Lady of the Wood's abode and she instructed me to use my breath of peace to start a fire with the nearby bellows (actually, she said "belows," thus implying I'd be breathing for some "aboves" later, but whatever), and then the game came to a screeching halt. I, incidentally, was doing all the screeching. Because, try as I might, I could not breathe in exactly the right way to get that fire started. I could make those stupid balloons float, I could aim a bow with my inner calm, but inhaling and exhaling along with the bellows in precisely the exact way it wanted me to was impossible. The fire never started—though it almost did once when I literally nodded off while "playing"—so I could never get the magic bag from the Lady of the Wood. While most games would have the decency to give me a flamethrower, this $125 monstrosity gave me angina. So I did what I do whenever a game drives me insane: I went online.

Are there cheat codes for personal bliss? Not on www.gamefaqs.com there aren't. There was no way to jump past the fire and get further along my personal path to nirvana. I tore the Magic Rings from my digits, hurled the Light Stone back into the box, and did the only sensible thing—I started up *Painkiller* and shredded my way through a few hundred monsters just begging to be minced into bloody chunks.

And it was then that I knew peace.

Robert Coffey
robert_coffey@ziffdavis.com

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